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A Man of Renown

Part Two

But the radio industry had prepared an ambush for ASCAP, setting up a company called Broadcast Music Incorporated and signing up songwriters from country-and-western and other fields previously disdained by ASCAP, in preparation for trouble with ASCAP. ASCAP pulled all its music off the air.

BMI immediately became functional, and some observers have seen this as preparing the decline of American popular music to its present nadir. It may have been a factor, but it was one of many. Also significant was the abandonment by the major broadcasting companies of network radio in favor of the rising medium of television. Ironically, this would work to Les Brown's advantage.

During the ASCAP ban, radio stations could play only music licensed by BMI or material that was in the public domain, that is to say music old enough that its copyrights had expired, which included folk and much classical music. Stephen Foster's *I Dream of Jeannie with the Light Brown Hair* for a short time was a hit.

"That's why we did *Bizet Has His Day*," Les said. (The piece is based on Bizet's *Arlesienne Suite*). "And *Mexican Hat Dance*. That's why we did *Marche Slav* by Tchaikovsky. If you didn't record things that were in the public domain, the disc jockeys couldn't play them on the air. We even did *Old Dog Tray*! *Bizet* was during that time, 1941."

"*Bizet* was Ben Homer's chart, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"And where did you find him?"

"He was just out of the Boston Conservatory and he came to [illegible] looking for a job.

"Homer was very strange to work with. You'd get a chart about every six weeks. But when you got it, it was a gem. Frank Comstock could do six in a week, if you wanted him to. Glenn Osser could make an arrangement in two hours. And a great one, every time. He had perfect pitch. He didn't have to go to the piano. But I'd say Ben Homer gave us the style."

However, Frank Comstock, born in San Diego, California, September 20, 1922, became the most important writer for the band. One of Comstock's charts, a reorchestration of *Leap Frog* made when Les expanded the band — this riff tune, based on an octave leap, was written by Joe Garland, who also wrote *In the Mood* — became a hit and the Les Brown band's theme. Later Comstock arranged, orchestrated (for Dmitri Tiomkin, among others), or scored music for films and television shows, though always retaining his association with Les.

"Frank is still writing for us," Les said. "He wrote most of our last album."

Prior to joining Les, Comstock had written three pieces for Stan Kenton. But a more sustained association was with Benny Carter. Comstock wrote for him for eight months until Carter dismantled his band in 1942 and turned his attention increasingly to composition and studio work in Los Angeles.

In 1939, Les encountered a young singer whose work he liked. This meeting would profoundly affect both their lives, its long effect making her a major movie star.

She was born Doris Kappelhoff on April 3, 1922, in Cincinnati, Ohio, and grew up there. She was called Dodo by her family. Like Ella Fitzgerald, she aspired to be a dancer.

"I loved the movies when I was very young," she remembered. "But dancing was my favorite thing. I started when I was about four, and I went to dance class four times a week. I sang in personality class at the dancing school. I adored dancing.

"I don't know if I thought about acting. But I thought a lot about movie stars because all kids do, and we played movie stars. And I thought about California, how great it must be. We would see the magazines. It was always sun shining. And I loved the way the movie stars dressed. It was all *exciting*.

"But I don't know if I really thought that I was ever going to do it. I wasn't the kind of person who was a go-getter about being successful and being a star and all of that stuff. I think it's tragic if it becomes the all-important thing in life. It must be tragic for those who don't have a career in that field.

"I was a real mid-western person who thought about home, and getting married, and having a nice family and taking care of my house. I always loved taking care of my room when I was a little girl, and helping my mother to clean. I learned to iron when I was ten years old. I just thought I was going to be a home maker. It didn't work out that way. Everything went in a different direction.

"When I was about twelve or thirteen, we were getting ready to move to California. My dancing partner and his mother and my mother and I had been there to get some new dance routines. We spent about a month in Los Angeles. Oh God, that was the biggest thing in the whole world. We loved it so much that when we came back to Cincinnati, my partner and his mother wanted to move out to L.A. The following year we decided that my partner and our mothers would go, and we would see what could happen, and what was in store. Then maybe her husband would come out. My father was not living with us at the time. But my brother wanted to go.

"We were going at the end of October. I was in Hamilton, Ohio, visiting relatives to say good-bye. Four of us young people went out, and the car was hit by a train. It was October the 13th, and it was a Friday.

"I haven't really talked about this very much. I had terrible fractures in my leg. I was laid up about three years. The bones were not knitting, and it was becoming a terrible thing. I couldn't stand on crutches, I couldn't bear the pain. Finally, they started to knit."

Her aspirations to dance were finished. But she could sing, and she began doing so on radio station WLW in her home town. It was there that Barney Rapp, leader of a successful local band with whom she worked at the station, changed her name to Doris Day.

Then she joined the Bob Crosby band.

"I was with Bob Crosby a very short time," she said. "They were going out on the road. Bob had a half-hour radio program. There was a gal who was going to be on that show. She was a friend of somebody important. And so they decided that it would be a good idea if she sang with the band."

It's an old show business story. Girl balls Powerful Person, gets the gig. Ironically, the girl who snagged her job did her a major favor. It is always fascinating to look back and try to trace the strings of our lives, and of course she can never know what would have happened to her had she not been thus displaced. But destiny is merely what happens.

Doris said, "The manager of the Crosby band, Gil Rodin, who was a wonderful person, said that Les Brown had been to the Strand theater in New York and had seen me and would like me to join the band. I said, 'I don't know much about Les Brown.' Gil said, 'He has a terrific band, and he's a terrific person.' So I said, 'Well I'd like to meet him.' I wasn't sure what I was going to do.

"I didn't know the fellows in the Bob Crosby band too well, but they were very nice. I really was looked after. The guys were like brothers to me. They were older. They were all married. And then I found I was going with a very young band, and I was concerned that I would be lonely."

She was seventeen.

"But then," she said, "Les was always so concerned, and so careful about everything, and he was so dear with my Mom. It was a family scene. From then till now, Les has always been a wonderful friend. We all lived at the Whitby apartments in New York at the time. Claire was there with the babies. We were all so close. We still are.

"It was a good band, and I loved it. We always talk about the laughs we had. When you have thirty or more one-nighters in a row, that's hard. But we still just laughed."

If the band was good for her, she was good for the band. With her vocal, Les recorded *My Dreams Are Getting Better All the Time*. He wrote the arrangement. Though the song was not one of the immortal ballads, it was nonetheless a substantial hit.

I said to Les, "I think she is under-rated, for all her success. I catch her in an old movie, and I am amazed at how well she sang. When I was in high school, I saw the band in Niagara Falls, Ontario, at an arena. She was gorgeous, and she had wonderful posture. I suppose that was from the dancing. And, I have to tell you, Les, I still remember it: she had the most beautiful derriere."

"Oh sure," Les said, laughing. "We used to call her Jut Butt. We'd say, 'Hey, Jut Butt.' She was a good egg to be around. On the one-nighters and things."

Stumpy Brown was still in school at the time. He graduated from New York Military Academy in 1943, turning the academy band over to Johnny Mandel, class of '44, and joined Les's band three weeks later.

"And my dad retired from being a baker," Stumpy said. "He sold the bakery. I think he was happy to get rid of it. He was only in his fifties. It was wartime, and school teachers were at a premium, especially for music. And he started teaching in high school, although he had no academic credentials. I don't think Dad went past third grade. He taught in Tower City, and we lived in Lykens, which was only ten miles away.

"When the war was over, the state stepped in, and said, 'Mr. Brown, for you to continue teaching at school, you're going to have to get a degree in music. Go to summer school, for just one summer. That's all you have to do.' He said, 'I'm too old to go to school.' And he lost his job. For some reason, he got another job in a little town called Hegins, where my mother was more or less raised. They sold their house in Lykens, and moved to Tower City, and he taught privately.

"Incidentally, when I joined the band, my dad said to Les, 'You know, one of these days he'll be doing something in front of the band for you.'

"Les said, 'I don't think so. He plays bass trombone. What do you think he'd do?'

"My dad said, 'Maybe he'll be singing.'

"Les said, 'Look, Dad, I can't sing. You can't sing. Warren can't sing. Sylvia can't sing. What makes you think Stumpy can sing?' And my dad said, 'Well his mother can.'"

A few years later, when Butch Stone left the band for a time, Stumpy took over his vocals, and when Butch returned, Stumpy continued to sing the up-tempo numbers.

And Doris Day had become virtually a member of the family.

"She married a trombone player from the Jimmy Dorsey band, Al Jorden," Les said. "When he left the Crosby band, he told her, 'All right, get home here.' He was jealous! One time there was a picture of her with the band. She had legs crossed and you could see her knees. He wrote her a letter! She was crying. She showed it to me. I had to write him a note and saying, 'Hey, it's all right, we need publicity, and this isn't bad.'"

It was a period when Down Beat heavily emphasized cheesecake photos of the "canaries" or "chirps", as it was prone to call them, who sang with the bands.

Doris left the band, had a baby, then was divorced and returned. "I had to wait until the baby was old enough to take on the road," Les said. "I took her mother with us."

And then came the alchemical combination: Les, Doris Day, and *Sentimental Journey*.

"Ben Homer and I wrote *Sentimental Journey* together," Les said. "It's hard to make guys believe that, because in those days bandleaders were putting their names on material they didn't write — I was offered so many songs. I never would do it. Unless I actually had something to do with the song. In this case, Ben called me and said, 'I'm up at Buddy Morris's office.'"

The Morris office was in the Brill Building. The building is still there, on Broadway in mid-town Manhattan. Many music publishers had offices there, and it has always had — to me, anyway —

a faint aroma of rancid thoughts. In tribute to the savage insensitivity of its typical inhabitants, the author James T. Maher called it "Attila's last outpost."

Les said, "I found out later that Homer was trying to get an advance from Buddy. Buddy was too smart. He said, 'I know you're a crook. Get in there and write me a tune. You're not getting any money from me unless you give me a tune.' Homer told me one time that his philosophy was fuck the other guy before he fucks you. I told him, 'Ben, that's a terrible way to live.'

"He was going to publishers all over town saying, 'You can't get on the air unless you pay me. I'm Les Brown's arranger, I make the arrangements, I tell him what to do.'

"I was living at the Whitby when he called. He said, 'I've got a pretty good idea for a tune. Why don't you come on up and we'll write it together? I've got the front part but I can't think of release.'

"I had nothing to do so I went to the Brill Building. Homer had . . . . " Les went to the piano and played a variant on the front strain. In this version, the cell of the tune, the first two notes, drops a sixth. This would increase the range, limiting the number of singers who would be able to handle it. Les pulled this fragment down to a major third, and that repeating pattern is the material of the front strain as the tune finally was published.

Les continued: "Homer said, 'What'll we do about the release?' I said, 'We'll do the Sears and Roebuck change,' which is a four chord to a one chord to a two chord to a five chord." Les played it. "We wrote it in a few minutes. I think I had as much to do with the song as he did.

"In the meantime, the band wasn't recording. It was during the ban."

Wreaking further havoc on the American music business, in the wake of the ASCAP strike, James Caesar Petrillo, president of the American Federation of Musicians, barred all recording by union members, finally settling for a royalty on records to be paid into union trust fund. Petrillo's argument was that recordings were putting musicians out of business, on which point he was absolutely correct, but nothing did more to put the big bands out of business than that strike, which enabled the emplacement of the singers as stars, Frank Sinatra and Nat Cole among them.

The Les Brown-Ben Homer ballad was sitting in the office of Buddy Morris. Les said, "Two or three guys wrote lyrics on the tune, but Buddy Morris didn't like them. Then I got a call from Buddy, who said, 'I finally got a good lyric. It's called *Sentimental Journey*.' I said, 'That's good. Where did you get that?' He said, 'I'm reading a book. It's a Baedeker of the Eighteenth Century called *Sentimental Journey*, a guide to the great inns of Europe. I got Bud Green to write a lyric.' Bud Green wrote the lyrics to *I'll Get By* and *Once in a While*. And also *Flat Foot Floogie*. I went up and heard the lyric and I said, 'Great.'

"I had Homer make an arrangement. I said, 'Ben, I want this in thirds, clarinet above the subtone tenor lead, clarinets below.' I'd used that combination in a lot of my own arrangements, and I liked the sound. He came in and it was . . . . " Les sang a blatant, loud figure. "I said, 'Stop the band! I told you what I want. Change the first sixteen bars or we don't record the thing.'"

Doris remembered:

"We were at the Pennsylvania Hotel in New York. We would rehearse after work, when all the people were out of the dining room. That song suddenly appeared. Les handed me the lead sheet. I thought, 'This is really good.'

"The very next night we had a remote out of New York, about 11:30. And we put that on and, Bang! Right off the bat, I started getting mail about it."

Les said, "People would come up and ask about it. It's a simple song, simple as hell. So we stopped playing it for a while, because we were afraid somebody would steal it before we could record it.

"The record ban ended in November, 1944, and we went in and recorded it."

Stumpy remembers that the band was playing a job in Boston and took a night train to New York to record the song at Liederkranz Hall in the morning.

"Columbia put it out in January, 1945," Les said. "It was just after the Battle of the Bulge. When that was won, we knew the war was over. It was perfect timing. If we'd brought it out earlier, I don't know whether it would have been a hit. Psychologically, it was perfect timing. I've had so many GIs come up and say something like, 'Hey, I was on a boat docking in New York and it was our favorite song, because we were going home.' It might not have been a hit if it had not been for the record ban, which delayed it until then."

It reached the top of the popularity charts, a hit so big for Day as well as the band that it became almost a theme song for her.

Les parted company with Ben Homer. "When I found out what he was doing, I had to fire him," Les said. "When his reputation got around, nobody would hire him. And he didn't have to do that. He wrote so well. I said, 'You write me one arrangement a week between now and Christmas and I'll give you a five thousand dollar bonus.' And that was in the 1940s. He didn't get close to it. I don't think that year I got more than ten arrangements. But they were all good. He was an evil man. But by now I had Frank Comstock and I didn't need Ben Homer. Frank wrote practically everything for us for a while."

Sentimental Journey had made Doris Day a star. And so striking were her looks that the movie industry was beckoning. But that was not the immediate reason she left the band. Les said: "She was getting five hundred a week, through '44, '45, and part of '46. That's equivalent to five or ten thousand now. She got so far ahead — she wasn't spending the money — she married one of my saxophone players, George Weidler, and they decided they didn't want to go on the road any more. I understood that, because I didn't want to go either, but I had to."

Sentimental Journey came when the bands were already encoun-

tering trouble. Costs of travel were rising, and television held a particular appeal to the returned GIs who were marrying and settling down to raise families and thus were less inclined to go out for amusement. Both baseball and movie attendance declined. But network radio, in the last days of its vigor, and soon television, actually rescued the Les Brown band.

"Skinnay Ennis had the Bob Hope radio show until he went into the service," Les said. "Then Stan Kenton had the show. He went into the studio and blew out the walls. Hope said, 'Stan, I love your band, but it's not for us.' Then he had Desi Arnaz, who didn't know a fucking thing about music, but Hope didn't know a fucking thing about music either, didn't know that Desi didn't know. Desi had a Latin band around town. And so Hope's radio agent, Jimmy Saphier — Hope had the biggest radio show at that time — came in to hear our band and sent a note, asking me to have a drink. I went over to his table, and we got talking about the Hope show. He said, 'Desi Arnaz doesn't know anything about music.' And Jimmy did; he was an ex-trumpet player.

"I said, 'I'd be interested.'

"He said, 'You can make far more money on the road.'

"I said, 'I don't *care*. I want to get *off* the road.'

"I didn't even know Hope. I made the arrangements with Jimmy Saphier. I met Hope in the studio at NBC.

"Doris had left the band in '46. This was spring of '47. Jimmy tried to sell Hope on Doris and the band. Hope said, 'Yeah, she sings well, but how about that band?' I got the job, and Doris didn't. Two years later, she had two hit movies and Hope had to pay through the nose to get her."

She made a series of musicals for Warner Bros., co-starred with Kirk Douglas in *Young Man with a Horn* (the worst movie about jazz ever made except for all the others), played Calamity Jane in the film version of *Annie Get Your Gun*. She became increasingly known as an excellent light comedienne and a solid dramatic actress. A drama coach once told me: "It's easier to teach singers to act than actors to sing."

But just as Nat Cole's singing success overshadowed his pre-eminence as a pianist, her movie stardom obscured her excellence as a singer. She not only sang with keen intonation and good time, she always had a sense of the dramatic meaning of a lyric.

"We started on the Hope show in September of '47," Les said. "Come '48, and Bing Crosby was a guest on the show. When Bing and Bob were on NBC together, the rating went sky high.

"We'd do Hope's theme *Thanks for the Memory*, monologue, a band number, a skit, a commercial, a song from Bing, another short skit, a five- or six-minute sketch, theme song and out. For our band number one night, we played *I've Got My Love to Keep Me Warm*, truncated because they only allowed us two minutes. The chart was by Skip Martin. The first chorus was in and so was the piano solo and the last chorus.

"I got a telegram. 'Heard *I've Got My Love to Keep Me Warm* on the Hope show. Go in and record it tomorrow, even if you only do one tune. I want to put it out right away.' It was from the sales manager of Columbia Records. I called him on the phone and said, 'Hey, schmuck, we recorded that two years ago, 1946, while we were at the Palladium. Now look for it.'

"He called back about four hours later. He said, 'We found it, it's great! We're gonna put it out.' About a month later I got a call from the distributor here saying, 'Hey, you've got a hit on your hands.' I said, 'Horseshit.' He said, 'You've got a hit.'

"Most of the bands were folding at the time. We were lucky: we had Hope to keep us warm. You have to be lucky in this business. If Bob Stevens from Decca hadn't come in to hear us, I might not have gone on in the music business. If that guy hadn't been listening to the Hope show that evening, that record would still be at the bottom of the barrel."

As the big band era came to an end, Les and his band were in an unusual and advantageous position. They had a steady network radio (and later, television) show to provide financial sustenance and at the same time continuous public exposure. Network radio was disappearing. So were "locations", as they were called. "We used to play Elitch's Garden in Denver for a month at a time," Les said. Elitch's Gardens is a 36-acre amusement park that, in the "swing era" was an important stop on the itineraries of bands heading out to or back from the West Coast.

"And I went on doing the Hope show for years," Les said, "including the overseas tours. We did eighteen of those tours.

"Hope would be on radio or television or, early, both, from 1947 until the middle of the '50s. We'd book the summers. Until about 1957, we'd go out each summer for a twelve-week tour, capitalizing on the radio and television shows. We did very well.

"We had Buddy Rich in the band one summer. We got along fine. I even roomed with him at one point. When he had his own band, he introduced me once, saying, 'This is the only leader I never fought with.'

"In 1950, we island-hopped with Hope for 32 days across the Pacific. We traveled in two DC-4s. We did Hawaii for four days, Pearl Harbor, one for each service, on to Johnson Island and Kwajalein and Guam and Okinawa, then Japan, then we went to Korea for two weeks. We were there right after MacArthur invaded at Inchon. They'd pushed the North Koreans up to the Yalu, and we even played in North Korea. We had lunch with General MacArthur in Japan, just before we went over to Korea. He said, 'Don't worry, you'll be safe in Korea. It'll be cold, but you don't have to worry about getting shot at.' I said, 'How about the Chinese Reds?'

"He said, 'Oh, they wouldn't dare.'

"They dared. They came across the border.

"The day we were leaving to come home — I was staying at the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo along with Hope — I got a call from a United Press reporter I'd met. He said, 'They've come across the Yalu. All hell's gonna break loose.' And of course it did.

"But we were on our way home. We went up through the

Aleutians and Alaska. We ended up doing our last show at a base in the state of Washington. It was a great tour. Everybody had taken eight-millimeter cameras. I edited it all down to about an hour and a quarter, and Hope paid to have copies made for everyone on the tour, about seventy-five persons."

The Hope show was not the only TV series on which Les and the band appeared. For some time his was the house band on the Steve Allen show, briefly in 1964 played on *The Hollywood Palace*, and was the house band for the complete run of *The Dean Martin Show*, 1965-1974.

"I'm a half-assed arranger," Les said. "But as a conductor, I'm good. That's one thing I'll say for myself. Ask anybody who's worked for me. I have done guest appearances with symphony orchestras, but I'm not really good enough for that. I can do it, but that's just an ego trip." He chuckled. "And my name got me by. But a real symphony conductor? It's one of the toughest jobs in the world. You have to know that repertoire the way we know *Stardust*.

"But I could follow singers, follow a trapeze act, an elephant act — which I did on *The Hollywood Palace*. I got that experience at the Capitol Theater and Palace Theater in New York, the Strand, other places. We always had to have acts with us. So I got vaudeville experience. Even when I was in music school, I played saxophone in the pit of a vaudeville house.

"I think all that paid off. I could conduct, and that kept the band together."

Les and Claire have one son and one daughter, and four grandchildren. Les Jr. is much involved in Les's business enterprises, and he and Les have a warm relationship. It wasn't always easy.

Les Jr. was born February 15, 1940. Like most of the offspring of famous people, he was not at first aware that his father was a public figure.

"I guess I began to be aware of it," Les Jr. said, "around the time of *Love to Keep Me Warm*, although he was famous before that. But it didn't really sink in. I started going with him Friday nights or Saturday or sometimes both down to the Palladium around 1953, when I was around thirteen. And I'd see this mass of people come in *every night*, and it still didn't sink in.

"I got into my teens, and then it did.

"It has two sides to it. It is a double-edged sword. One of them is: you have instant recognition, people are automatically accepting of you, you see the reflection of what he has created in their lives. The other is: Who the hell am I?

"And that takes quite a time to get over. It's a difficult process, especially when you're a Junior. That's what we're given to deal with.

"We have a fairly solid family. We're not perfect, by any means, but we've always kind of hung in there. And I went through my traumatic experiences with it. One of them was getting away from music when I was in my twenties. I started acting. I was able to work a lot, get a television series and all that. And that gave me a bit of an identity.

"Then I had a second crisis. He was on *The Hollywood Palace* and on the Steve Allen and Dean Martin shows. And my acting work dried up a little bit. So I went through a battle with alcohol and drugs and all that. And finally, when I was around thirty-seven, I took a look and said, 'I can't continue this. I've got to stop.' So I got into a program and got sober and got out of the entertainment business altogether for a few years, and found out about real life, and that's where I started to create my own feeling of self-worth. And eventually I got back into entertainment, with Dad, and the music that I always loved.

"Now I don't have a problem with being his son. I have enough within me to know that whatever the perception of other people, I know who I am."

Les Jr. runs much of his father's business. At times he sings with the band, taking it on the road, particularly when Les Sr. doesn't want to go out with it.

Now the music stands read *The Band of Renown*, instead of *Les Brown and His Band of Renown*, as the billing and publicity described them for so many years.

One of their projects is the marketing of a 1954 stereo — yes, stereo — recording of the band. Gerry Macdonald, a young tenor player and recording engineer then living in Los Angeles, was working with a prototype two-track "binaural" (as such things were at first termed) tape machine. To test it, he asked friends for permission to record them during engagements. He recorded several bands, including the Les Brown band at the Hollywood Palladium. The tapes of these recordings have been in Gerry's possession ever since. Remembering them, Les got in touch with Gerry. The record companies manifesting little interest in Macdonald's treasury of historical documentation, Les decided to put out his own album.

And there is that pending PBS TV show scheduled for August.

Les Jr. said, "Two years ago, I started thinking, 'My gosh, he's coming up on his sixtieth anniversary.' So I started to write a history of the band. My dad is so self-effacing. He's not one to want a biography of himself. It's always been 'the Band of Renown' that's been his foundation. It wasn't Les Brown and his Orchestra.

"I started to take a look at that. What does it take to keep a band in the forefront for all of those years, through all of the changes in music and in the country?

"I got a call from Carl Scott, vice president of artist's relations over at Warner Bros. He said, 'There's something we want you to see.' We had dinner in Los Feliz, and then went to a club called the Derby. I walked into 1942. Everybody was dressed in '40s dress. And then a band called the Royal Crown Review came on. Warner had just signed them. It's a seven-piece band, with a lead singer. And they're all dressed in that 1940s style. And they started playing *swing*. Modern swing. Original tunes. And the dance floor

filled up, and the people were twenty-five, twenty-six years old.

"I had presented what I had written as a documentary to PBS. I had presented it as a two-hour special in three segments, and the third segment was a live show. WEDU in Tampa bought the idea of the live segment. I wanted to take it full circle, with the band that started in 1936, in 1996. I wanted to put the best of the old and the best of the new together and create an event.

"I used Royal Crown Review, Sheena Easton — who sang *Sentimental Journey* — Suzanne Somers, Hal Linden, who played clarinet in a Benny Goodman medley and sang *I've Heard that Song Before*, the Nicholas Brothers with their grand-daughters, Tex Beneke, John Pizzarelli, and more. On the dance floor were white-haired people in their seventies and some in their eighties, and the twenty-five-year-olds. It was packed. It was a magical evening.

"That's the show that's coming up in August on PBS."

Les Brown — Senior, that is — is currently living in Pacific Palisades. For years he and Claire lived in a two-story penthouse apartment on top of an art deco building in Santa Monica, the building in which William Randolph Hearst once lodged Marion Davies. (The late Don Ellis's recording studio for a long time was housed in the high-ceilinged apartment Hearst kept for her in New York City.)

Les and Claire loved their apartment, whose balcony looked out on the wide grass swath with a seemingly endless row of tall palms that forms the western border of Santa Monica, and, for that matter, the continental United States. Beyond it, the Pacific. But the building was badly damaged in the 1994 earthquake, and Les and Claire took a house in Montecito, a suburb of Santa Barbara about eighty miles up the coast. They felt disoriented there, far from their friends and the symphony concerts Les loves. So they took the Pacific Palisades house, waiting for the day when they can get back into that exquisite apartment. (Red Norvo lives almost around the corner.)

Les retains all his old friendships, including one with Don Wood of Matewan, New Jersey. They met in 1958, and Don began a systematic documentation of the band's history, making notes on dates, personnel of sessions, and the like. Woody Herman kept very little of his awards and memorabilia, including photographs. The documentation of his life fell to a friend whom he met when he was in his early twenties, Jack Siefert, an engineer retired now and living in the Pittsburgh area. "And Les," Don Wood said when I told him that, "kept nothing." And I realized, in memory, that in Les's home I hadn't seen an award of any kind on display. As the Woody Herman chronicles (fresh acetates of old airchecks, for example, which Woody tossed away "like Frisbees," as Jack put it) in Jack Siefert's home, the documentation and memorabilia of the Les Brown band repose in the home of Don Wood in Matewan. Don was for twenty-five years chief photographer for Bell Labs, and developed their video program.

In 1994, Les was named Alumnus of the Year at Duke University. Don accompanied him to the ceremony. "He tried to con me out of my hand-written notes on the band's history," Don said. "I won't give them to him!"

Instead, Don's collection has been donated by the terms of his will to the music school of Duke. "Les is all for it," Don said.

People like Jack Siefert and Don Wood, archivists and historians by instinct, are invaluable resources, and jazz historians have not sufficiently utilized them. Like everyone else, they are growing older, and some day won't be there for the interviewing. Indeed, time is running out on much unrecorded jazz history, which is why I have chosen to donate so much of my time (and your subscription money, which finances it) to explore music history from primary sources and get more of it on record before it is irretrievably lost. And one day not long ago it occurred to me that I had written almost nothing about Les Brown, and I thought: it's time.

Recently Les threw a big party for Butch Stone at the Ventura Club in Sherman Oaks, California. It was filled with friends and former band members, as well as those who play in the present band. Frank Comstock and Dave Pell were there. So were Ralph Young, Van Alexander, Patty Andrews of the Andrews Sisters, Terry Gibbs, Frank Comstock, Billy May, Larry Gelbart (a young writer on the Bob Hope show when Les joined it), and many others. Bob Hope was there with his wife, Dolores. He is in his nineties, his eyesight and his hearing almost gone; she led him to their table, and Steve Allen sat with them, a protective air, almost a halo, around them. Steve was the emcee for the occasion. At one point Steve said that Bob's wife was going to sing. She is eighty-eieight, and I am sure I was not the only one in the room, which seats about 300, who braced to give polite and compassionate applause. It was unnecessary. She sang superbly, without tremor or breathlessness, and the ovation, when it came, was a standing one.

And of course Butch was the center of it all. His hair is white, and he is in vigorous good health, as ebulliently funny as he was when he played with the band. He still sings with the band, but a problem with one eye prevents his playing with it. As guest of honor, he sat in front of the band.

"Your playing days are over, Butch!" Les chided from the bandstand. "And so are mine!"

The band sounded fine. "And we had two subs in tonight," Les whispered to me later. Steve Allen said, "I've been to a lot of these things, but this was different. It was warm, really warm."

"How active are you still?" I asked Les at one point.

"We play about three or four gigs a month. Age happens to all of us."

I said, "You seem to have had a happy life."

"Very," Les said. "I've been very lucky. We've been married fifty-eight years. I've had my pitfalls. I was a bad boy, a couple of times. We all were."

(I suppose Woody was one of those he had in mind. Toward the end, when Woody was too ill to make a gig one night in Ventura,

California, Les jumped in to lead his band for him.)

"Claire and I survived it," Les said, "and the last twenty years have been our happiest."

Ted Nash lives in Carmel. He became one of the top studio players in Los Angeles, published a book on the playing of high harmonics on saxophone, retired, and plays a good deal of tennis.

Dave Pell developed a second career as a photographer. He founded a group called Prez Conference, devoted to the music of Lester Young. He remains an active musician in Los Angeles.

Ben Homer was born in Meriden, Connecticut, in 1917. In addition to the Les Brown band, he wrote for Bob Chester, Jack Teagarden, Raymond Scott, Artie Shaw, and Tommy Dorsey. But he disappeared from the music business. He became a Jehovah's Witness, and in 1953 a minister in that movement. He died in Reseda, California, in 1975.

Bob Higgins, one of the band's best arrangers, left the music business. "That's an interesting story," Les said. "He and I were very close. We used to room together on the road. He wasn't that great a trumpet player, but he was a very good writer. One day I said, 'I'm going to do you a big favor. I'm going to fire you.' He said, 'Why?' I said, 'Because you're too smart to be in this business. You could do a lot better elsewhere.' And I fired him. A few days later he called me and said he had a job, working for Dan Reeves, in securities. Dan Reeves owned the Cleveland Rams. I ran into Dan Reeves and he said, 'That Bob Higgins who used to play in your band. He's the smartest man I ever hired. I may make him my partner.'

"Later, when the Denny's restaurants were going to go public, they asked him if he'd handle their stock issue. He said, 'Oh, maybe for a million dollars.' A few days later they came back and said, 'Okay.' He became a very big executive with Denny's. He came in to hear us two or three years ago. He's many times a millionaire. I don't know where he is now — in Texas, I think."

On Les's recommendation, Geoff Clarkson, an outstanding pianist, became Bob Hope's music director for the comedian's public appearances, a position he held for many years. He lives in North Hollywood, California.

Dick Shanahan, who was with the band from 1943 to 1946, was one of the finest big-band drummers of the time. His exemplary dyanamics are well displayed in the original recording of *Leap Frog*. His playing on that record has not dated in the least. "He's still a good drummer," Stumpy said. "He played with us not long ago." Shanahan lives in Van Nuys, California.

The air of tolerance in the critical establishment's attitude to Les Brown extends to his sidemen. There are no entries for Clarkson or Shanahan in the Feather encyclopedias, *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*, or any other reference book I can find.

Wes Hensel, a generous and kind human being who was with the band from 1947 until at least 1959, became head of the brass department at the Berklee College of Music. He was a good friend of mine; he died, like so many lead trumpet players, of a heart attack.

Doris Day, of course, had a phenomenal screen and recording career: she made 39 films in 20 years. Many of them, such as *Young at Heart*, in which she starred opposite Frank Sinatra, were box-office hits. Most of her LPs were hits as well. She formed the Pet Foundation in Los Angeles and remains active in the animal-rights movement. She did TV shows in 1985. She lives in the Carmel Valley — not far from Ted Nash — on an eleven-acre ranch overlooking a golf course near Monterey, and still loves to sing. Her voice remains youthful and strong and she gives occasional thought to recording again.

Doris said, "Frank Comstock and I talk on the phone all the time. We always remember the laughter."

Frank lives at Huntington Beach, which is down the coast from Los Angeles and not far up the coast from his native San Diego. Frank, who wrote a good deal for Doris Day when she became established as a recording star on her own, said, "Doris is my best friend. When my wife was dying, hardly a day went by that Doris didn't call.

"I was talking to Doris just the other day. She said, 'Oh Frank, I wish we were back on the road again. I never had so much fun in my life.'"

Why have Frank and Les retained a cordial relationship through all these years? "I don't know," Frank said, with a chuckle. "Les is not a malicious guy, and neither am I."

"Les is a great guy," Doris said, "and I love him very much."

And Butch Stone summed it all up: "Music is Les's life."

Les Brown on CD

For their help, I thank Stumpy Brown, Frank Comstock, Doris Day, Butch Stone, and Les Brown. I especially thank Don Wood. Don went to some trouble to go through the Les Brown discography, which is enormous, and advise me on material available on CD. This compilation is Don's; the comments are mine.

Best of the Big Bands, Columbia CK 45344. This is the core repertoire of the band during its historic period on Columbia, from 1940 to 1950. It includes *Leap Frog, Bizet Has His Day, Mexican Hat Dance, My Dreams Are Getting Better All the Time, I've Got My Love to Keep Me Warm*, and *Sentimental Journey*.

It is interesting that the band's reputation rested more on instrumental numbers, mostly at good medium swing tempos. The digital recording has enormously enhanced the sound. Of course, the equipment on which we played these records when they came out as 78s wasn't much. I was a cactus needle man, myself; and I learned to repair cracked records with nail polish. This was easier with Columbia Records than some others, because they had some sort of paper laminate in the middle and held together even when badly cracked. But Columbia's surfaces went bad quite quickly.

The sound in this CD is quite startling. All the parts are clearer: you can really hear the voice-leading now. And the original sound, of course, was good. Columbia in those days recorded at Liederkranz Hall, a converted church. The sound in that studio was so good (for the time) that Woody Herman switched labels to Columbia in order to use it. And Columbia got good sound on Les Brown to begin with. It is now enchanced.

Unfortunately the annotation of this CD offers a classic example of what liner notes should not be. A lot of giddily cute gushings about the band, but no listings of personnel, no names of soloists or arrangers, no recording dates. The unidentified male singer on *'Tis Autumn* is Ralph Young, later famous as half of the Sandler and Young duo. The fine jazz tenor player is Wolfe Tannenbaum (or Tayne), and the excellent clarinetist is Abe Most. The arranger on *You Won't Be Satisfied Until You Break My Heart* is Frank Comstaock, and *My Dreams Are Getting Better All the Time* (vocals by Doris Day) is Les.

Les Brown with Doris Day, Columbia CK 46624. In his first period with Columbia, from 1940 to 1950, Les recorded 184 sides, 38 of which were with Day. This CD contains 16 of her tracks, most of which prove what heights of superficiality popular music could scale at that time. Oddly, I enjoyed the CD, which evokes amorphous memories of naive yeaernings. How romantic those slow dance ballads could feel. Even *Tain't Me*, which I rather liked when it came out, turns out to be a contrived and silly song, a Tin Pan Alley turkey crafted for that market of calf-eyed adolescents who used to buy those cheap-paper weekly magazines of song lyrics in candy and "sundries" shops across the street from the high school. Johnny Burke's and Jimmy Van Heusen's *It Could Happen to You* is a pretty good song, if by no means a masterpiece. The only truly adult song is the dark *We'll Be Together Again*, chart by Frank Comstaock. Published in 1945, it's a bebop tune by the late Carl Fischer, the Indian pianist who was Frankie Laine's accompanist. The lyric, which is Laine's, is one of the best I know. It contains a line of poignant insight: "Don't let temptation surround you, don't let the blues make you bad." Day was not yet the great singer she became, but the material was all there.

The Essence of Les Brown, Columbia CK 66378.

Les Brown and his Great Vocalists Columbia CK 66373

The Best of Les Brown Curb D2-77606. These are from the Capitol catalogue, issued under license from EMI.

The Many Shades of Les Brown Pair PCD 1189. Also from the Capitol vaults. Capitol, fortunately, has begun to issue a lot of its treasures. A *Compleat Capitol Les Brown* would be in order.

Les Brown, Time Life series. 21 cuts.

Digital Swing, Fantasy FCD-9650. This album was recorded ten years ago, in 1986, when the fad for digital recording was high. The digital-to-two-track studio sound is crisp, clear, and a little bloodless. Engineers since then have learned to record in analog and then mix and transfer in digital; the effect is warmer. A good album, though, made up of standards. Mundell Lowe on guitar is one of the soloists.

Anything Goes USA Music USACD-685.

Les Brown and his Band of Renown, with Julie London and June Christy. Hindsight HCD 408.

Les Brown and his Orchestra, Hindsight HCD-131.

Les Brown and his Orchestra 1944-46. With Day. HCD-103.

The Great Les Brown, Hindsight HCD-330. The Hindsight recordings are from air checks, and, as often happened in radio broadcasts of live performances, the band, not suffering under the don't-goof tension of the recording studio, often played with a looseness you didn't get on records. I have only one of the band's Hindsight records, *The Great Les Brown*. It's in mono, of course. The liner notes give neither personnel nor dates nor even the source of the material. I would guess it is from the 1950s. Tunes include *Piccolino, I've Got My Love to Keep Me Warm, Ridin' High, Speak Low, Begin the Beguine*, and other standards. The charts are excellent, the band loose. This is a *very* good album.

Les Brown Live at Elitch Gardens, 1959. Status DSTS1002.

Les Brown Live at Elitch Gardens Part 2, Status DSTS1006. These two discs were taped in 1959 on the evenings of July 3 and 4 — the Fourth of July holiday. The band is playing for dancers, which is perhaps why the tunes are short, close to the three-minute norm of the old 78 records. But the recording is in stereo. The sound is good and you can get a feel of what the band sounded like in person, even though there is no stretching out in the solos. Jo Ann Greer is the vocalist. Status is a British label that specializes in big band jazz. I had no trouble ordering these records, but one can write to the company at 13 Gardenia Road, Bull Hills Park, Middlesex EN1 2JA, England.

The Les Brown Show from Hollywood (U.S. Navy shows). Magic # 68.

The Bands of Renown. Renown Records RR-1001-2. This is one of the Gerry Macdonald records, taped in two-track in 1954. Les considers that the band was at its peak at this time. The soloists include Dave Pell, tenor; Ronny Lang, alto; Ray Sims, Bob Pring, and Dick Noel, trombones, and Don Fagerquist, trumpet. Don Trenner's piano is under-recorded, but otherwise the stereo sound is remarkable.

Besides his own band, Les issued stereo CDs of the Harry James and Les and Larry Elgart bands. The James band was in superb form, with fine writing. The Elgart band doesn't really do it for me; I find it over-stylized, even affected. But it was a good band, and Macdonald's recording of it was excellent, far in advance of the state of the art at the time.

You can enquire about these three CDs from Renown Records, 12724 Ventura Bd # 489, Woodland Hills CA 90364. Also available is a good video of the Brown, James, and Elgart bands.

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