Gene Lees
Jazzletter

P.O. Box 240
Ojai, Calif.
93024-0240

January 1997

Vol. 16 No. 12

Before I Forget
by Fred Hall

Fred Hall has founded and owned a number of radio stations. He was also an ABC news correspondent. He is the author of a biography of Dave Brubeck, It's About Time *(University of Arkansas Press). His radio show* Swing Thing *is widely syndicated. He submitted the following to* Newsweek, *which turned it down.*

You don't have to be a news junkie like me to have noticed all the extravagant ballyhoo over the [illegible]-bag Telecommunications Act of 1996. Enacted in a [illegible]ment by Congress and hailed by Bill Clinton as an [illegible]petition, the bill was also greeted as a [illegible]netic future. What caught my attention was almost a po[illegible]regulation, designed to destroy what was left of a once-thri[illegible] community-serving industry: radio.

My love affair with radio goes back to about 1930 and Atlanta, Georgia. First there was WSB, with its twin towers atop the Biltmore Hotel and owned by the *Atlanta Journal*. ("The *Journal* Covers Dixie Like the Dew.") Then came Georgia Tech's WGST. In our basement I made crystal sets to receive both, using an empty Quaker Oats box, some number 14 enameled wire, and a cat's whisker. I sold each for a dollar, 75 cents of which was profit. It wasn't long before I had my Radio Amateur's license, and at sixteen proudly held a First Class Radiotelephone commercial license from the Federal Communications Commission. The start of 1941 found me working full time at a brand new Washington, D.C., station, WWDC, as an engineer and occasional (very) announcer.

I truly mean "full" time. They let me sleep on the studio couch, provided I signed off the station at midnight and signed it back on at 6 a.m. I was the guy in the control room, spinning the records and flipping the switches. Should the sign-on announcer show up late, I got to do the morning show. Who knew? My competition was Arthur Godfrey. I engineered countless "remote" broadcasts, too: ballgames, grand openings, and, best of all, dance-band pickups with all my heroes: Benny Goodman, Glenn Miller, Artie Shaw, and more. They paid me $16 a week. I would have done it for free.

By some fluke I just happened to be standing in front of the AP teletype at WWDC that December Sunday afternoon when the news of Pearl Harbor flashed across. I think we were the first station in the nation's capitol to broadcast the bulletin and the confused follow-ups. Dropping a long mike extension to the street-corner below, we interviewed dozens of pedestrians. The most frequent comment was, "The Japanese? This'll be over in a month at the most!"

In a month I was in the Navy. In six months I was, as so many others were, en route to the South Pacific, still in radio, but with radar and sonar as well. As fate had it, within a year I was attached to the Armed Forces Radio Service, where I seriously moved into programming.

Discharged at the sub-zero Great Lakes Naval Base in late 1945, I rushed to get back into commercial radio, choosing a job where I was sure it would be nice and warm: New Mexico. It was 10 below in a blinding snowstorm when I arrived in Gallup, just in time to begin digging through two feet of ice to install a copper ground system for a new station, KGAK. I doubled as chief engineer *and* program director.

Better weather and more experience came with a move to Sacramento, California, where news, special events, and celebrity interviews were regular assignments. This was terrific training for my next 50 years in radio via many stations, including those at which I was an owner and manager.

Here's how all this history ties in with politics and the Telecommunications Act of 1996.

Remember that radio, despite the inroads of television, was just about everything to everybody. You *lived* with radio. It was your first line of instant information, be it flood, fire, earthquake, or the most common disaster, a traffic jam. For the majority of communities, being without local TV, it was the *only* source until the next day's newspaper. There's a responsible obligation.

Entertainment, chosen to please your prime local audience, was second in importance. Most stations were locally owned and operated. Each was its own cottage industry. You could *not* own more than one station (or, later, one AM and one FM) in a given community. You couldn't control or dominate. Competition was fierce, both in programming and sales. Everyone was on call, worked strange hours, and few got rich. It was fun, it was challenging, and it was often very satisfying.

Then, under Ronald Reagan, deregulation began just as available frequencies were virtually all occupied. The FCC now told owners they could buy and sell at will without having to operate a station for at least three years. Prices, especially for FM facilities, ballooned out of sight. Buy a station for $100,000, sell it for $750,000 six months later. Inside another year it could go for a cool million.

Of course, the pyramid eventually collapsed, but not before responsible local owners couldn't resist the golden chance to retire with wealth, and group ownership began to accumulate properties. The first moves of the new owners were to cut staffing, automate as much as possible, transfer real management to distant headquarters, and abandon community involvement. Soon "formats" were reduced in most markets to rock (one shade or another), country, or news-talk. The "news" was minimal, the "talk" via satellite and national in nature. Here and there were religious, ethnic, or "nostalgia" operations. But even these were fed mostly by satellite.

The Telecommunications Act of 1996 delivered the final and heaviest blow. It allowed massive group ownership: up to eight stations in a single market, up to half of all stations in even the

smallest market. License terms were extended to eight years, and competing applications forbidden except under rare circumstances. By the fall of 1996, CBS radio alone owned eighty stations and controlled the biggest country-wide audience.

As for non-commercial (more or less) public radio, for all its undeniable value as an alternate medium of select audiences, it is not a substitute for profit-driven, audience-reactive enterprise.

In sum: competition has *not* been encouraged. It has, in effect, been denied. Greed is the winner. The public is (again) the loser. But bless the rare, stubborn, local owner-operator with the courage, imagination, sales savvy, and chutzpa to remain "live" and deeply involved in community affairs. Such operators do survive here and there. May they thrive and may true radio *broadcasting*, as opposed to today's *narrowcasting*, revive somehow to rival its proudest days.

It is needed.

— **Fred Hall**

Phrasing

Part I

When parents disapprove of their children and are truly deceitful about that disapproval, there will never dawn a new day in which you know your own value. Nothing can fix a damaged childhood. The most you can hope for is to make the sucker float.
Pat Conroy in *Prince of Tides*

Twenty or more years ago, I wrote in my column for *High Fidelity* magazine an examination of the influence of Frank Sinatra on other singers. Sinatra's revolution was in what came to be known as phrasing, which is to say, the shaping of phrases according not so much the contour of the melody as the meaning of the words.

I mentioned some of those Sinatra had influenced, including Steve Lawrence, Jack Jones, Tony Bennett (though not so obviously, since there is also a strong Louis Armstrong influence in Tony's work), Vic Damone, and Julius La Rosa.

I had, in the earlier period of his fame, overlooked La Rosa, for what I now realize were two reasons:

He was frequently saddled with inconsequential songs. And the arrangements that accompanied him were the journeyman work of Archie Bleyer, far below the level of the writing of Robert Farnon, Marion Evans, Nelson Riddle, Marty Paich, and others I admired. "But he was a gentle man," Julie said. "And I liked him a lot. He treated me with great kindness."

I suspect that the record that jolted me into awareness of the quality of La Rosa's work dated from a period when he recorded for MGM, with charts by the wonderfully fertile and inexhaustibly musical Don Costa. Further, I suspect it was *Spring Can Really Hang You Up the Most*. It is a song I had admired for its craftsmanship but never really cared for. It had been recorded for the most part by relentlessly "hip" girl singers indulging in its 1950s affectations of language. Indeed, the only record of it I had ever liked was Jackie Cain's, for its inevitable musicality. La Rosa's approach to it is dramatic, as if it were a costume drama. The song is of its time and place, and so is the "character" he becomes in singing it. In La Rosa's reading, it takes on a different coloration and genuine beauty, the natural expression of someone living in that time, and as such it is surprisingly poignant rather than cute.

Whatever the song I heard that day, it was to me revelatory about La Rosa, and I wrote that he was the most brilliant singer of the Sinatra school. And the most under-rated. I knew whereof I wrote. One of those who had under-rated him was me.

Someone showed that column to him, and he wrote me a thank-you letter that initiated one of the closest friendships of my life.

We talked on the telephone, and a huge correspondence grew up, much of it on the nature of songs and the essence of singing. I have had long conversations about singing with all sorts of friends and acquaintances among singers, talks about vibrato, vowels, intonation, the pitch problems of diphthongs on high notes, talks about intervals. But the most extended discussion of the subject has been with Julie. He has all our correspondence. Typed, single-spaced, it is a pile a foot and a half high, he tells me.

In the long letters Julie and I exchanged I found a new and free form of communication, devoid of such journalistic usages as "well-informed sources" — of late truncated to the meaningless "sources" — "told this writer," and similar circumlocutions. Thus La Rosa had a distinct influence on me, since the Jazzletter grew out of the pattern of our correspondence. He writes well, and his penetrating intelligence contributes to the character of his singing.

Sinatra posed a problem for the singers influenced by him. If you followed what he did too closely, you'd sound like an imitation of him, which of course you were. The temptation, in one's formative stages, was to affect his enunciation, with those softened r's after consonants, rather broad a's, slight dentalization of t's and d's. The sound of t is produced by placing the tongue on the ridge of gum just above the top front teeth and using the release of it to articulate a plosion of air. If you vibrate the vocal chords simultaneously, the t becomes d. If you place the tongue a little forward of that position, on the teeth, it alters the sounds of t and d, adding a slight sibilance. In the "normal" enunciation of the sounds dr- or tr-, the tongue's tip touches the dental ridge; but halfway back in the mouth it is touching the molars, and is already in position to make the r sound. If the tongue is touched to the teeth, it isn't, and must be pulled back quickly for the r. This peculiarly softens the r, as in the way Sinatra pronounces "dream" and "tree". The sound is particular to New York-area Italians. The late actor Richard Conte — a lovely man, by the way, let me note in passing — had it. He was born in Jersey City. You do not hear it in the speech of Boston or Rhode Island Italians. Tony Bennett, born in Queens, strongly dentalizes t's and d's. La Rosa doesn't.

He does one thing Sinatra does: he will sometimes affix a

vowel to a word that ends in a consonant. He'll sing *song-uh* and *wrong-uh*. This produces a distinctive cut-off that adds to the clarity of the enunciation. Since Julie wasn't aware of doing this until I pointed it out to him, I concluded that in his and Sinatra's work, it is the influence of Italian on them. In Italian, most words end in vowels.

Furthermore, there is such a thing as an Italian voice, the gravelly sound that comics affect when telling Mafia stories. You hear it not only in the voices of Italian men, such as actors Aldo Ray, Al Pacino, and Paul Sorvino, and Congressman Peter Rodino of Rhode Island, but even in Italian women, such as Brenda Vaccaro and Ann Bancroft. Pianist Mike Renzi, who has such a voice, once quipped: "It comes from all the shouting and screaming at home when you're a kid."

That's funny, but in fact it is as surely a national (though not universal) physical characteristic as the commonality of blond hair in Scandinavians. There are also African voices, which have an airy sound, somewhat like the tenor of Ben Webster. Actor Danny Glover has such a voice. So does Harry Belafonte. And the late Nat Cole had the most beautiful African voice I ever heard.

La Rosa has a slightly Italian voice. And the dilemma Sinatra posed was that once a singer had learned the lesson, what was he to do? *Not* phrase for the meaning of the lyrics? Yet La Rosa found his own sound and enunciation and identity.

If anyone could be called a jazz singer, surely Sarah Vaughan could, and she resented the term. "I'm just a singer," she'd say. She particularly resented it when someone called her a blues singer. I can't recall her ever singing a blues. For my own purposes, I consider there is no such thing as a "jazz singer". But there are jazz-*influenced* singers. Indeed, almost all the best singers of American music after about 1930 have been influenced by jazz. It's in the approach to time, whether in ballads or up-tempo material. La Rosa is *strongly* jazz-influenced.

Julius La Rosa was born in Brooklyn, New York, on January 2, 1930.

"My father was born in Sicily — right in Palermo," Julie said. "My mother — her name's Lucia — was born in a little town called Castel Buono, which is outside Palermo. My father was born in 1906. He came to America when he was fourteen. My mother came with her family when she was about eleven.

"In 1927 or '28, there was a major boxing match. My father built a crystal radio in order to hear the match. From then on he was a self-trained radio repairman. He had a succession of radio stores. He would move to better locations. He was a terrible businessman. 'Charlie, I can't pay you.' 'All right, pay me when you can.'

"My mother was married at fifteen and a half and by the time she was eighteen, she had three kids. I have a sister who is a couple of years older than I. Her name is Rosaria. In the old Sicilian, don't ask me why, that becomes Sarida. A little boy born between me and my sister died when he was about four months old. My mother had another baby a couple of years after that. She died at two and a half of spinal meningitis. It had an incredible effect on my parents, and through them on me and my sister. I found out, when I was in shrinkdom, that I felt an element of responsibility in her death, because she died falling downstairs. My whole life I was afraid I might have pushed her down the stairs. Her name was Angelina, and we referred to her as Baby Angie. Talk about old-country superstition! My parents would say, 'Swear on Baby Angie.' 'Mama, I didn't take the peanuts out of the jar.' 'Swear on Baby Angie!' It compounded the guilt.

"You *know* me. You *know* the effect it had."

"Was the family musical?" I asked.

"Well," Julie said, "my father, though he was unschooled, liked music. You remember the old Victrolas? Always I was hearing either classical music or excerpts from operas. Not the whole opera, just excerpts. I heard a lot of old Caruso records. I guess from that I developed a love of music and ultimately singing. In the beginning, I wanted to be a baseball player. I wanted to be Pee Wee Reese with the Brooklyn Dodgers.

"Pee Wee Reese came up about 1940, about the time Sinatra started to make a lot of noise. I started to sing and I loved it.

"My Uncle Tony used to tell a story. My father would have those big radio consoles in the shop, for repair. When I was small, I would stick my head in the back where the speaker should have been and sing, and I'd say, 'How do I sound coming out of the radio, Uncle Tony?'

"Everyone said I was bashful. I wasn't bashful. I was scared to death of any kind of authority, because of the influence of my father over me. I would be asked to sing at parties, but I would never do it. I would fail at it. I could never please my father.

"The first time I ever heard him praise me, and it was indirect, was when I was doing the Arthur Godfrey show. I was singing some Patti Page hit. My father was in his store. He had a relatively new thing, a Webcor tape recorder. He taped the show with a microphone. In the middle of the song, he said, 'Attaboy, Julie.'

"The classic sign of the child who feels he isn't being attended to properly is bed-wetting. And I was a bed-wetter. And in front of company, my father would say in Italian, 'Here's my son, *il piscoletto* — it's apparently a Palermo regional expression. My son the bed-wetter.

"The awful thing was that when I learned all that, I was unable to rid myself of the unconscious effects. That's why it took me twenty-five years to feel comfortable on a stage. It's a matter of 'My God, they *do* like me!' But there's always that fear on the first show, 'They're not going to like me.'"

"You know," I said, "I was never able to please my mother, and Henry Mancini was never able to please his father. Hank went into military service and never completed his degree at Juilliard, and his father always said to him, even when he was a huge success and many times a millionaire, 'If only you'd got your degree, you

could teach.'"

"That's uncanny."

"You always said that Hank was what you call in Italian *superbia*. He really wasn't that way. He was just one of the cats,"

"That was probably his defense," Julie said.

"Hank told me that when he was a kid in school, his mother would make him salami sandwiches, and it was really greasy salami. The grease would seep through the bag and eventually left a spot in his desk."

"Yes!" Julie said, with a laugh of recognition. "And it would smell when you took it to lunch."

"And up on the hill above Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, where Hank went to school — I went there with him — were what he called the cake eaters, the well-to-do WASPs, who in effect spat on them for being Italian and from the working-class area. I don't think Hank ever really got over it."

"You don't get over those things," Julie said. "The bed-wetting completely destroyed any possibility of having any confidence. I once *built* a five-tube super-heterodyne radio. In my father's store. When I finished it, and the fucking thing was playing, we were listening to it, listening to Martin Block. The radio *worked*, and he looked at it and said, 'Bad soldering.'

"I must have been fourteen or fifteen."

"Most opera singers don't sing words," Julie said in a conversation the next day. "They sing notes."

"And a lot of them," I said, "sing out of tune. Including the famous three tenors."

"Yes they *do*!" Julie said.

"Mario Lanza, for one."

"He was *terrible*. He probably had the same kind of immigrant background as I do."

"Sinatra had a stupefying impact on a lot of us."

"Oh yes. He came out of the era of dance bands, and the singer had to sing within the framework of the meter. Despite the restrictions, he was still able to put a period here, a comma there, to heighten the meaning. It came to be known as phrasing. And all he was doing was telling the story as he believed those words should be spoken. But it was revolutionary and it was what made him Sinatra. Nobody did it before. And so those of us who grew up listening to him didn't copy him but recognized the intelligence of that kind of interpretation."

"The poor ones," I said, "imitated him. The smart recognized the validity of the method. It creates an illusion of improvisation, as if you are thinking the words up as you go along."

"Today, coming home in the car," Julie said, "I was listening to Natalie Cole. She was singing one of my favorite songs, *When I Fall in Love*, but there's a mismatch of words and music in that song, the lines 'the moment that I feel *that* you feel *that* way too . . . ' The way to phrase it is 'the moment that I *feel* . . . that *you* feel that way too.'" He sang "feel that way" as a triplet.

"That," I said, "is what I feel is the legitimate liberty of the singer, as opposed to scooby-dooing a song, which I hate."

"Exactly," Julie said. "Sondheim will not credit a singer with that liberty. It's 'Sing it the way I wrote it.'"

"One thing I do object to is singers substituting their own words on lyrics, adding words, and all that. Anything any singer can think of to substitute in a Mercer lyric, for example, is something Johnny undoubtedly thought of and rejected. You can count on it. Sinatra has annoyed me for his 'hip' substitutions in the later years."

"But," Julie said, "the first chorus, he was always meticulously honest about the lyric. He did his number in the second chorus."

"Not in the later years," I said. "He'd throw that stuff in wherever he felt like it."

"Yes. By then he'd become impressed with *himself*."

"In those early years, when you were listening to him [illegible] Brooklyn, and I was listening to him in Canada . . . "

"Oh!" Julie said. "Oh! He was unbelievable."

"*The Lamplighter's Serenade*, for one."

"There was a moon out in space," Julie sang. The song, *The Night We Called It a Day*, has a lyric by Tom Adair, music by Matt Dennis, one of the finest and certainly the most under-recognized songwriting teams in American song history. Julie and I sometimes communicate almost in code, we've been talking about songs for so many years. He was referring to the four Bluebird sides Sinatra recorded, with Axel Stordahl charts, on January 19, 1942: *The Night We Called It a Day, The Song Is You, The Lamplighter's Serenade*, and *Night and Day*, all four of them literate songs. A few years ago, Jo Stafford, who shared singing duties with Sinatra in the Tommy Dorsey band, told me that she was driving along in her car, turned on the radio, and picked up one of those tracks. She said to herself, "My God, he can sing."

I told Julie that a friend of mine, studying voice with an opera teacher, asked who in her opinion had the best vocal technique, thinking she would name someone in opera. She said, "Fra[illegible] Sinatra." Henry Pleasants, an authority on opera, told me once that he had rarely met an opera singer who didn't have a Sinatra collection. "They know how good he is," Henry said.

I listened to those four 78 rpm Bluebird sides until they turned gray. (The younger reader will not know that's what happened to those old shellac records when you played them extensively.) They electrified La Rosa, as they did me, and as the subsequent records on Columbia did as well. They still stir me. They took me so deeply into lyrics that I became a lyricist. Sinatra was twenty-seven when he recorded those Bluebird sides. Julie was 17 days past his twelfth birthday, and I was 20 days short of my fourteenth birthday, and those records changed both our lives.

"Oh!" Julie said. "Frank could take a thirty-two bar song and turn it into a three-act play. He is number one, and the second guy in line is number thirty-six. That's the gap between Frank and whoever is the next best singer."

"When was the first time you sang in public?" I asked.

"The Grover Cleveland High School senior chorus. My friend Joey used to get time off. He'd get days off from school. He'd say, 'We've got to rehearse for the concert next Wednesday.' I joined the chorus so I could get those days off.

"I then get a mad crush on Jeanette Caponegro. She was in the All-City chorus. I figure I've got to get into the All-City Chorus so I can spend Saturdays with her. This is 1946. I'm a fast sixteen years old. So I go to try out for the All-City Chorus. Remember *Just a Song at Twilight?* Well I sang that for the audition. Mr. C., as he was always called, hit a couple of chords on the piano and you had to sing them. And I sang them. I had a curious thing: I would hear the third first.

"And he said, 'Why hasn't Miss Brown sent you to me sooner?' She was my glee club teacher at Grover Cleveland High School. He said, 'Well, young man, I'm going to break a rule. We usually don't tell the students who try out for us until we send a postcard to the teacher, and normally Miss Brown would tell you. But I'm telling you right now, you're in the All-City Chorus.' I'll never forget that. In my whole life. That's when I began to sing. I was in the All-City Chorus! Three hundred voices.

"Now the head of the chorus was P.J. Wilhousky. A mad Russian. A strict disciplinarian. If you fucked up, he'd say, 'Get out!' And you were out of the All-City Chorus. We were rehearsing the summer concert of 1947, which was the year I graduated high school. We were doing *Begin the Beguine.* We get to 'I'm with you once more . . . ' It's a cello line. The baritones ain't gettin' it right, the first basses ain't gettin' it right. I'm in the third row. And of course I'm doing Frank!" Julie sang that section of the song, imitating Sinatra's phrasing.

"And P.J. Wilhousky says, '*That's* the way to do it! What's your name, young man? Julius La Rosa? That's the way everybody should sing it!'

"I was nine feet tall as I walked to the subway going home with Jeanette Caponegro.

"Two years ago there was a piece in the *New York Sunday Times* magazine by a man who is a professor of zoology at Harvard, about his remembrance of singing in the All-City Chorus with one of the great people he's ever known, the stentorian and dictatorial Peter J. Wilhousky. And he related the time when Wilhousky said to one of the singers, 'Young man, you're singing *flat.* And do you realize, *Julius La Rosa* used to sit in that chair?'

"I wrote to him and we had a nice correspondence."

After singing with the All-City Chorus, Julie joined the Navy for a three-year hitch.

"I joined the Navy," he said, "because I had no goals. I was two months under eighteen. I joined the Navy to learn electronics so I could go into the radio business with my father. Charlie La Rosa and son. And while I was in the Navy I was in the glee club. You got the weekends free. The perks of being in the glee club.

"After boot camp, I was sent to aviation electronics school for 28 weeks to become a radar operator and learn Morse code and basic electronic theory.

"In Pensacola, Florida, I was ship's company on the U.S.S. Wright. That means you are part of the ship's crew. The Wright was an aircraft carrier, a converted cruiser. I did twenty-six carrier take-offs and landings — as a crewman, not a pilot. One of my proudest moments came when we were running out of gas and our radio was out. I used our APS4 — my God, I'm amazed I remember that — our radar to get us back.

"In June, I was home on leave when the Korean War broke out. I got a telegram saying, 'Report to your ship.' I got to the ship and we were going to ship off.

"Between July and September, we would go to a joint outside the base called the Town Pump. I would get up and sing a couple of songs, and the owner would be feeding me and my buddies beers, on the arm. We did that for several months.

"Arthur Godfrey came to Pensacola to take training for his Navy wings. He was a pilot and a big Navy-phile."

Godfrey was a Navy veteran. He had been what is called in the Navy a white hat, an enlisted man. He was flying private planes by the 1930s, when he worked in Washington as a disc jockey. His opposite number at another station was Fred Hall, who remembers: "He was a big boozer. He used to fly his plane in from Virginia. We were afraid he'd kill himself, or somebody else." Godfrey would smash records he didn't like over his microphone, which is not exactly good for the health of the microphone, and abandon advertising copy to improvise his own versions of it. He graduated in the post-World War II years to his own five-mornings-a-week radio show on CBS and a weekly television show called *Talent Scouts* on that company's burgeoning television network.

Godfrey spoke in a low, unhurried baritone that I found unctuous and perfidious. He liked to sing, and did so a notch or two below the mediocre, playing strum-strum-strum ukelele. He was an incredible corn-ball, I could never bear to listen to the man, sensing his duplicity, but the mothers and grandmothers of America adored him and he was a huge success in those early days of fuzzy grainy black-and-white television.

Godfrey was, as Julie said, a Navy buff, as, in California, Jack Webb was a cop-kisser. The U.S. military has always had a shrewd sense of the value of the entertainment industry to its causes. Hollywood cranked out endless movies in praise of the military while the military has given its help to the movie-makers, including the use of aircraft, ships, and anything else, all at the taxpayer's expense. Such movies inspired enlistment and, more important, gave the military more clout to get more money from Congress.

Godfrey went to Pensacola to get his flier's wings. This required six take-offs and landings from an aircraft carrier. Veteran Navy fliers have likened the experience to landing on a postage stamp. Such landings require the highest flying skills. Thus there are those who suggest that Godfrey's experienced navy "co-pilot" actually made his landings. In return for granting Godfrey his

wings, the Navy got exposure on network radio and television.

But Julius La Rosa knew, could know, nothing of that as, full of naivete, he had his first encounter with Godfrey. The experience would prove searing.

"While he was there," Julie said, "one of the kids I used to buddy around with — to this day, I don't know who it was — snuck into BOQ, Bachelor Officers Quarters, and left a note for Godfrey saying, 'Why don't you come to the Enlisted Men's Club and hear our buddy Julie sing? Maybe you'll want to put him on *Talent Scouts*.'

"The next day I got a telegram saying, 'Be at the enlisted men's club tonight and Mr. Godfrey will audition you, as your shipmates requested. Lt. So-and-so.'

"My date that night was a girl named Beverly Rentz. We went to the thing. I got called up on the stage and I sang *Don't Take Your Love from Me*. Godfrey said, 'Young man, we took a kinescope of this, and when I get back to New York, I'm going to put this on my television show.' I say to him — and I'm not a smart-ass kid — I say, 'Mr. Godfrey, if I give you my mother's telephone number, will you call her up to be sure she's watching?' I swear on my children, I did that!

"But you know, I think that gave him the first hint that I was not a show-business kid. When I later got on his show, he used that naivete to advantage. I looked shy. I wasn't shy! I was scared to death!

"He goes back to New York. The admiral gets a telegram. 'I've told my audience about that young sailor, but the kinescope didn't show up. Can you send him up to do the show?' I had some leave accrued, but I'm sure they'd have sent me anyway.

"I get up there, I think it was Monday morning. Archie Bleyer set the key. I think it was *I Only Have Eyes for You*. That and the duet I was supposed to do with Godfrey, the one Crosby did with his son, *Sam's Song*. I rehearsed it with him.

"Now the show went on. During rehearsals he could see that I didn't have the slightest idea what I was doing. I waited and waited and Godfrey never called me. And then the show was over. I stomped out of the green room. The producer stopped me, he said, 'Julius, where are you going?' 'Home,' I said. 'My mother was watching, my friends were watching, and I wasn't on.'

"He laughed. 'Wait, wait!' It turned out that Godfrey saw I was not ready at all. He called the admiral and said, 'Can you extend the kid's leave? I'll put him on the show next week. I can put him on the radio Monday and Tuesday and he'll get a little experience and I can put him on the television show Wednesday night.'

"That was the paradox of the man. He was a sick man.

"I do the three Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday morning radio shows. I do the Wednesday night television show. And he says, on the air, 'Young man, when you get out of the Navy, you come right here, and you've got a job.'

"In the following year, whenever I was home on leave, I went up to the show. I even took my mother. That year he called on me to do his Christmas show.

"As a result of the Godfrey show, the Navy transferred me to Washington, D.C., to sing with the U.S. Navy band. I sang with that band for a year.

"I got discharged November 11, my father's birthday, I went up to the Godfrey office and said hello. I knew the people by then, and they were polite, and they sent me home. I had never at that time heard the phrase, 'Don't call us, we'll call you.' But that's what it sounded like. Two days later I got a call from Archie Bleyer. 'Can you come up tomorrow and set some keys? You're starting Monday.' I started on the show November 19, 1951.

"Godfrey said, 'Here's the fine young lad from the Navy.' He liked that word 'lad'. And you remember that kindly avuncular attitude he could affect? He says, at one point, 'Do you miss your buddies in the Navy?' Now I've been out of the navy about five fucking minutes! I said, 'Sir, I haven't been out that long yet.' And the audience breaks up. He gives that low chuckle of his." Julie imitated it perfectly. *Heh, heh, heh, heh, heh.* "In retrospect, I realize I was probably just a nice kid."

"You know, Julie," I said, "Mel Brooks told me something once. He said some days he'd wake up in the morning and go out and think, 'They're all going to realize I'm a fraud, and it's all going to go away.' And the next day he'd go out and think, 'Don't you realize who I am? I'm *Mel Brooks*!'"

"Of course!" Julie said. "That's the neurotic aspect of *all* performers."

Archie Bleyer, Godfrey's music director, had a long history as a writer of stock arrangements in the 1930s and as a bandleader. He was associated with Godfrey on his radio and TV shows in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Bleyer started a record label called Cadence, and had big hit records with the Chordettes and the Everly Brothers. He was known, like Mitch Miller, for commercial acumen rather than for distinguished aesthetic taste. He signed La Rosa to Cadence and got a hit with him on the Frank Loesser song *Anywhere I Wander* from the film *Hans Christian Andersen*. It reached number four on the charts in early 1953.

La Rosa told Bleyer about a Sicilian folk song that he and his friends would sing on the subway on their way to Coney Island, *Eh Cumpari*. It is about a country band, and the participating singers have to imitate the instruments in it. Julie says it occupies a place in Sicilian folk culture akin to that of *Old MacDonald* in ours. Bleyer said, "Let's record it." *Cumpari* means companion, friend.

The song was a boon in that it sold a million copies and reached number two on the charts, and a curse that haunts La Rosa to this day: audiences still want to hear it. "Sooner or later, whenever I perform," Julie said, "somebody calls out, '*Eh Cumpari*.' I've given up. I just do it."

Julie drew fan letters from his first days on the Godfrey show, eventually seven thousand a week. His youthful innocence was part

of the appeal and he was featured as one of "all the little Godfreys," as Godfrey referred (somewhat patronizingly, one realizes from this distance) to his regular cast of talent. In a sharply perceptive profile of La Rosa in the September 28, 1987, *New Yorker*, Whitney Balliett described them as "that oppressed band of entertainers that . . . Godfrey had gathered around him . . . . Most of them were mediocre, and all of them had a basic purpose, to pamper Godfrey's ravenous and famous ego."

It is a well-worn show-business quip: It took me twenty years to become an overnight success. La Rosa is one person to whom fame actually did come that suddenly. One day he was an unknown kid, twenty-three yearsn old, just out of military service, and within weeks, even within days, he was a star. And he was, he has told me over the years, terrified. Nothing had prepared him for this. It had not even been his ambition.

He was playing a theater in Chicago. Girls mobbed the place. He went to his hotel room. There were girls gathered even in the back alley. He was alone in his room, wishing desperately he had someone to talk to. Fame was completely disorienting.

"Now," I said, "what was the story about you and one of the Maguire Sisters? Rumor always had it that you were having an affair with her. Were you?"

"I was *in love* with her. I'm twenty-three years old, and these three really pretty girls come onto the show. The one on the right, as you looked at them, was Dorothy, the one in the middle was Phyllis, and the one on the left was Christine. And Dorothy and I fell in love. She was married, but she and her husband were separated. We dated for a couple of years.

"And Arthur didn't like it. Christmas of 1954. I'm working at the Chicago Theater. Godfrey is going to take the Maguire Sisters to Thule Air Force base in Greenland over the holidays. So I tell Dorothy, 'Don't go.' But she went. And that was the end of it. There was stuff in the papers that Godfrey was able to get her and husband back together again.

"Phyllis was the real engine of that trio, even though the other two were older than she. She was the boss, she gave the orders."

"And wasn't Phyllis the one," I said, "who was Sam Giancanna's girlfriend?"

"Yeah. Sure."

"Rumor always had it that Godfrey resented you because he wanted to knock off Dorothy for himself. Was that true?"

"Maybe. It could have been Phyllis."

"*Drama in Everyday Life,* as they say in *Reader's Digest*."

"There's a lot of that goes on," Julie said.

"No kidding," I said. "You amaze me. I didn't know that!"

"And it doesn't go out of style."

"And what happened?"

"New Year's Eve. Dorothy and I are now history. Marian Marlowe was the semi-legit soprano on the Godfrey show who used to sing the duets with Frank Parker. She was opening at the Plaza. She called and invited me. I didn't have a date. So I called my press agent, who was Perry Como's press agent. He said there were some starlets in town. He said, 'But you don't want to go with any of them. Rory, Perry's secretary, is a beautiful girl. She's a Catholic.'

"I said, 'I don't care *what* she is. I'm not looking to get married. I just need a date.'"

Their first date was in January, 1955. They were engaged the following New Year's Eve and married in 1956. She was born Rosemary Meyer of a German-Czech family in Milwaukee, and called Rory. When she was young she won an Ava Gardner look-alike contest.

"And what about Godfrey?"

"Well, I'd become friends with the secretary to the producer. Her name was Amy Bullett, and we're still friends. In fact, when she got married and they had their first son, I was his godfather. She saw I was this raw kid. We'd have lunch.

"After a couple of months, it was in some famous restaurant where the song-pluggers hung out, I said, 'Amy, he's really not a nice man, is he?'

"She said, 'You know it. But don't let anyone else know you know it.'

"I said, 'Teach me how to contend with this paradox, this Mr. Nice Guy when the mike and the camera are on who won't talk to anybody when they aren't. A really arrogant man.'

"We used to have what we called prayer meetings. After the Wednesday night show, we would go over the show and start preparing for next week's. Here is a verbatim quote: 'Remember, some of you are here over the bodies of people I have personally slain, and I can do it again.'

"Toward the end of the summer of 1953, Godfrey started dancing lessons for the members of the cast. But none of the other guys on the show, the Mariners, Frank Parker, went. Only the girls. And I said, 'Forget it, I ain't gonna go either.'

"On a Thursday, there was a note on the bulletin board. It said, 'If you're not at today's dancing lesson, don't bother showing up for the show tomorrow morning.' That day, after the show, I got a message, 'Call your folks.' At the time I was still living with them. My sister was having a problem with her husband. Could I come home and help straighten it out? I went up to the office and asked if I could go in to see him. I said, 'Mr. Godfrey, I have trouble at home.' He said, 'Well, if you can get back, get back.'

"So I went home. Well, you know, Italian arguments never last an hour and a half. So I didn't show up. Next morning there was a note on the bulletin board saying, 'Mr. La Rosa, since you felt your services were not required at the dancing class yesterday, they won't be required on the show today.'

"I was astonished, because he'd given me permission. I walked over to the Lexington Hotel, where he lived, three or four blocks from 52nd and Madison where the studio was. I get on the house phone. I asked for Mr. Godfrey. The girl asked who was calling. I said, 'Julius La Rosa.' She said, 'Oh, Julius, I'm such a big fan.'

Thirty seconds later, with a different tone in her voice, she said, 'I'm so sorry, Arthur isn't in.' I know the poor lady's lying, because right in front of the hotel is his Rolls Royce, license plate AMG 1, Arthur Morton Godfrey.

"Some months before that, Tom Rockwell, who was the head of GAC, General Artists Corporation, had approached me. He was a man of great integrity. But one of the unwritten rules was that you didn't need an agent or a manager while you were on the Godfrey show. I had a lawyer by now, because of the money with *Anywhere I Wander* and *Eh Cumpari*. I was making 60,000 dollars a year, which was a lot of money in those days.

"I had a luncheon with Tom Rockwell, because I was scared. He said, 'If you'll sign with us, I'll guarantee you a minimum of $100,000 a year.'

"When Godfrey lied to me, I called my lawyer and asked him to call Tom Rockwell. I signed with Rockwell and he wrote a letter to Godfrey, saying, 'Dear Mr. Godfrey: 'In future all dealings in regard to Julius La Rosa will be handled through GAC.' To Godfrey, it was a slap in the face. I have been told since that he went to Bill Paley, who was the head of CBS, and said, 'Do you believe this little shit? I've got to get rid of him.' So Paley said to him, 'You hired him on the air? Fire him on the air.'"

"Well Paley was a monster, a dreadful man," I said.

Godfrey followed the advice. On the evening of Wednesday, October 19, 1953, Julie was to perform in the first half hour of the show. The show was nearing its end when at last Godfrey announced him. This is a transcript of what followed. Godfrey drops his r's. Whitney Balliett described his voice as "homey, drawling, glutinous, sinister." Perfect. And I noticed another thing as I listened to the tape of the show. Godfrey's voice, with its flat a's and wet-mouthed chuckle, is curiously like the voice Richard Widmark invented for the psychotic killer Tommy Udo in the film *Kiss of Death*.

Godfrey: Except for the Maguire Sisters and Luanne, who came after him, Julius is our youngest member. Yeah. How long ago did you come?

Julie: It was November 13th, no, November 17th, 1951. Be two years next month.

Godfrey: Not quite two years.

Julie: Yes sir.

Godfrey: It was about three years ago, then, when I first met you.

Julie: October 4th, 1951.

(There is audience laughter at this.)

Godfrey: When I first met Julie . . . I'll never forget when he first came up here, and I said to him, I told him, he came up and he did a couple of guest appearances with us, if you remember, he was in uniform. And I said, "Well when you get out of that man's navy, if you don't want to stay in for thirty years, come on up here and I'll give you a job." And he took me at my word. And he came and I put him to work. And immediately everybody loved him. And it always has done my heart good to see that you people saw the same quality in him that I saw. Which, if you have noticed, and I'm sure you have, is the same quality that I have in everybody in my cast. I pick them all that way. Sure he's got a good voice, but lots of people have good voices. There's something else that you like, which is a wonderful quality that it's hard to get. So, I'll never forget when he first came here and went to work steadily, he said, "Gee," you know he used to go, *Gee*. "I don't know, with all those stars on the show!" And I said to him, "Julie, you don't know it, but I don't have any stars in my show. In my show we're all just a nice big family of very nice people. Like yourself. And you hold on to that quality, and you'll never have to worry about a thing. You're just as big as anybody else, you j[illegible] go on, try to improve yourself all the time, and one day you'll be the big star, see?"

And this boy in two years time has done this. In two years time, he has . . . he and Archie have their own recording company now, and he's, he's, gotten to be a great big name. I would like Julie, if he would, to sing me that song called *Manhattan*. Have you got that?

Julie: Yes, sir.

La Rosa sings Manhattan.

Godfrey: Thanks ever so much, Julie. That was Julie's swan song with us. He goes now out on his own. As his own star. Soon to be seen in his own programs, and I know you wish him godspeed, same as I do. This is the CBS radio network.

Crossfade to theme: *Seems Like Old Times*.

The incident made headlines, of course. Some of the reports were so critical of Godfrey that he was forced to concoct an explanation of his actions. Obviously he couldn't say that he wanted Dorothy Maguire for himself, or that he had punished La Rosa for failing to attend a dance class, or that he was outrag[illegible] that a rising young star should have the timerity to engage an agent. So, in what remains one of the more bizarre lines in the history of show business, he said he'd fired La Rosa because he had "lost his humility." Humility, of course, being part of the job description for a career in show business.

The incident served to reveal to the public something of Godfrey's true character. The little old ladies who loved him also loved the boyish La Rosa. The resulting bad press may have been the start of Godfrey's decline, and ultimately would lead to the 1957 movie *A Face in the Crowd* in which Andy Griffiths played a hobo with a loveable personality who is promoted into television stardom. He evolves into a ruthless, egomaniacal and vicious figure who still maintains his facade to the public. The script was by Budd Schulberg, who certainly knew show business, the direction was by Elia Kazan. While the film does not closely shadow the life of Godfrey, everyone in the business knew the character was based on him, and before long the public knew it.

(To be continued)