

Mail Bag

Strangely enough, I never met Willis Conover. I first heard him about the same time you did. But my encounter was via recordings of Newport festivals, the ones that were done by Norman Granz. The Columbia releases never had Willis. At least I don't remember any.

And speaking of remembering, that's what your essay is about. People who don't remember. I spoke with someone yesterday who is sixty-seven, the best there is on his instrument, and he's being low-balled out of existence, because there are people who will work for \$50 a night since jobs are so scarce. And pretty soon, nobody will remember the best players.

Hank O'Neal, Chiaroscuro Records, New York City

I couldn't agree more with your loving appreciation of Willis. I grew up in West Virginia during the 1940s and '50s. Anyone who owned a shortwave receiver could easily hear VOA's transmitters in much of the United States. As an American, I couldn't have been prouder to have him representing me around the world. Every element of his work, from his choice of music to his presentations of it and his beautiful voice were first class.

And I strongly concur with your assessment of his importance to world history. There damn sure ought to be a monument to him somewhere. But like all of our musical heroes, his legacy lives on in those millions around the world whose lives are richer because he turned them on to jazz, and did so in such a classy way. Last night I did a Google search on Willis Conover and came up with more than 5,000 "hits". In the first hundred or so were a couple of dozen profiles of jazz musicians who said they first heard and were inspired to jazz by Willis. Among them were George Mraz, Gabor Szabo, Paquito D'Rivera, Adam Makowicz, and Ursula Dudziak.

Jim Brown, Chicago, Illinois

It's interesting how often people recall Willis's magical

speaking voice. It was one of the most beautiful male voices I ever heard.

The memoriam to Willis Conover was wonderful, and I learned a few things. He was a friend for many years and gave our jazz program [at what was then North Texas State University] some valuable exposure. This was evident when we visited Portugal, Russia, Germany, and elsewhere, when people would shout out titles of our compositions, which they wanted us to perform. I asked how they knew about them and they always said, "Willis Conover!" He was mentioned *many* times during our tours and always with great admiration.

We performed at the White House in 1967. AS I was walking out to the back lawn to see where we would play, I heard a shout and saw two people almost running down the circular road behind the White House. It was Willis and Shirley. He rushed up to me and said, "Leon, we have just returned from Russia. The League of Russian Composers had a reception for us upon arrival. The first question they asked me was, 'That Jazz band from some Texas school. They were all teachers, not students, no?'" Willis said he assured them they were all students and he said that they shook their heads and said, "Nyet, nyet!" What a compliment.

I have not seen the Willis collection at North Texas yet because they have been organizing it carefully. I am to be invited to see it when it is finally to be viewed. The music librarian told me it is absolutely amazing in scope.

You are totally right about the insulting way he was denied the Medal of Freedom. If there is anyone who should have received it, Willis Conover is number one, in my humble estimation.

Leon Breedon, Denton, Texas

Leon headed the jazz department at North Texas State University, now North Texas University. He is retired.

In 1968, Willis was the MC for JazzFest, the New Orleans jazz festival. He did a splendid job. As board members of the festival, Danny Barker, Al Belletto and I fought hard to persuade the board to accept Willis's proposal that he

produce the 1969 festival. The other board members knew as little as most Americans about Willis. We educated them. Over a number of contentious meetings and the strong reservations of the chairman, Willis was hired. The 1969 festival turned out to be one of the great events in the history of the music. It reflected Willis's knowledge, taste, judgment, and the enormous regard the best jazz musicians in the world had for him.

I won't give you the complete list of talent. Suffice it that the house band for the week was Zoot Sims, Clark Terry, Jaki Byard, Milt Hinton, and Alan Dawson, and that some of the hundred or so musicians who performed were Sarah Vaughan, the Count Basie band, Gerry Mulligan, Paul Desmond, Albert Mangelsdorff, Roland Kirk, Jimmy Giuffre, the Onward Brass Band, Rita Reyes, Al Belletto, Eddie Miller, Graham Collier, Earle Warren, Buddy Tate, Dickie Wells, Pete Fountain, Freddie Hubbard, and Dizzy Gillespie. The festival had style, dignity, and panache. It was a festival of music, not a carnival. An enormous amount of the credit for that goes to Willis. His achievement came only after months of infighting with the chairman and other retrograde members of the jazz establishment who did not understand or accept mainstream, much less modern, jazz and who wanted the festival to be the mini-Mardi Gras that it became the next year and has been ever since. They tried at every turn to subvert the conditions of Willis's contract, which gave him extensive, but not complete, artistic control. Because Willis was tied to his demanding Voice of America schedule in Washington, DC, much of the wrangling was by telephone and letter. He flew down to New Orleans frequently for meetings, which he despised as much as I did. He did not need all of that grief. He pursued his stewardship of the festival because he had a vision of how the music he loved should be presented.

The nastiness took its toll. When it was over, Willis was depleted, demoralized, bitter, and barely consoled that he had produced a milestone festival. In the course of the battle, he and I became allies and close friends. As a purgative, he was going to write a book about the New Orleans experience, but I'm glad he didn't; the issue is dead and so are many of the *dramatis personae*. Charles Suhor covers much of the 1969 story in his book *Jazz in New Orleans* (Scarecrow Press).

One night Willis and I were alternately commiserating and acting silly at the bar of the Napoleon House over a couple of bottles of Labatt's, his favorite Canadian ale. After a moment of silence, he turned to me and said in that deep rumble, "I love you, man." The moment is one of my most precious memories. We were friends and confidants after my family

and I moved to New York, where he had an apartment, and remained so after I left for other cities and we didn't see each other for years at a time.

In 1966, not long after the scandalous treatment you described Willis receiving at the White House jazz festival, I was in Washington for a meeting of the American Society of Newspaper Editors. It was about a month before he died. Willis invited me to lunch at the Cosmos Club, where he maintained a membership. I doubt if, at the end, he could afford it, but it was important to him to be there, to feel a part of the old Washington he loved. He was at the door of the club when my cab pulled up. In the year since I had last seen him, he had shrunk into an Oliphant caricature, his horn-rimmed glasses outsized on his face, his shoulders and chest pinched, sunken. Even his leonine head seemed smaller. His hair and his face were mostly gray.

He led me to the elegant dining room, on the way introducing me to a couple of men. He had momentary difficulty remembering the name of one of them. At the table, Willis launched into a diatribe against his old New Orleans enemy, but gave it up and started reciting some of his limericks. He wrote devastatingly funny and wicked topical limericks. But this day it was all by rote. He was strangely absent, and his speech was irregular, partly because of the ravages of the oral cancer he had survived, and partly, I thought, because he must have had a stroke. I could not lead him into any topic long enough for a conversation to develop, so I sat back and tried to enjoy the limericks. He seemed to want to entertain me, and I imagine he was deflecting any possible attempt on my part to be sympathetic or maudlin.

I was due at a meeting, and after coffee, Willis asked the waiter to call a taxi. He walked me to the door and we stood silently in the entry of that magnificent old building. When the cab arrived, I had to say something. I didn't want it to be "good-bye." So I said, "I love you, man." Willis swallowed and blinked. I gave him a hug and climbed into the cab.

As it made a left turn out of the drive, I looked over at the entrance. Willis had disappeared into the Cosmos.

Doug Ramsey, Yakima, Washington

Doug is best known in the jazz world for his work as a critic and chronicler. He has a formidable background as a journalist, first in print and then later in television. He anchored at WDSU-TV in New Orleans in the 1960s and at WPIX-TV in New York in the 1970s. Then he became news director first at KSAT-TV, San Antonio, then WDSU-TV in New Orleans, and then KGO-TV in San Francisco.

It was, as always, a gas to go the post box and see the latest package from you. I waited until Sunday to rip it open so that I could enjoy the contents along with the *New York Times* and some good coffee. It's early spring here and the weather is kind of like it was that week back in Boulder, Colorado, when you and I and Al Grey all hung out in Betty Weems' cottage — a bright sun and a crisp chill, perfect coffee drinking weather.

With the Willis Conover piece, I found I had tears in my eyes. It was such a powerful presentation of a jazz man, the jazz story, and the massive indifference of this great country to her most profound gift to the world; and also, I suppose, of the injustice of things. The scene with Willis on the wrong side of the rope was just heart breaking.

Ben Sidran, Madison, Wisconsin

I was quite touched by your reminiscences of Willis Conover. I too was blessed with his friendship.

I first met Willis more than half a century ago. A couple of years after we met I began my academic travels, as student and then professor. It wasn't until I returned to my native city in the 1970s that I caught up with him again. The occasion was a late '70s gig of Adam Makowicz at the now-defunct One Step Down. Adam — about whom I was one of the first U.S. writers to publish — introduced us, or rather reintroduced us. Of course Willis had no memory of our earlier conversation at the D.C. Hot Jazz Society and, indeed, why would he have? I was a jazz-struck nineteen-year-old, he a professional (local, not yet VOA) radio voice whom we all listened to.

We struck up a friendship after that OSD evening. I did an interview piece on him for the *Washington Post* whose principal (as stringer) jazz writer I was from the mid-70s to the late '80s. I did a *JazzTimes* cover story on him two years after that and a little later a *Down Beat* profile.

A few days after the interview piece appeared in the *Post* a letter was forwarded to me from one Evelyn Tan, who wanted to get in touch with Willis. She had grown up listening to him in south China, she explained. I called Willis and read the letter to him. A couple of weeks later I was again in the One Step Down and there was Willis in a booth with a gorgeous young Asian woman. He introduced me to her, Evelyn Tan. I estimated her to be in her late twenties. Willis was sixty-four.

I continued to see them at the OSD — I reviewed the club a couple of times a month for the *Post* — and one evening I asked manager Ann Mabuchi if they were regulars. She said,

yes, and added that she had heard they were "inseparable." It wasn't too many months later that they were married, thus making Evelyn his fifth wife.

I would encounter them every so often at jazz events and, without fail, they insisted, "We owe you, Royal!" They were clearly devoted to one another and attributed their coming together to my article in the *Post*. Willis later told me that she had nursed him through his cancer. Sadly, they broke up after about a decade, a couple of years before Willis's death, Evelyn soon remarrying. She is an editor at *USA Today*. I seem to recall that in addition to her several Chinese dialects and English (which she spoke like a native), she was fluent in French and one or two other languages. She was extremely intelligent and well-informed.

I too recall my shock upon observing Willis's deteriorating condition the final several years. At a tribute to him at the Cosmos Club a year before he died, I was wandering the dining room, looking for a table with my name tag. Someone was standing at my side saying hello. I turned and, for a moment not recognizing his skeletal appearance, suddenly realized it was Willis, who was all smiles. Ushering me to my seat, he enthusiastically greeted others along the way.

W. Royal Stokes, Silver Spring, Maryland

In his long career as a jazz critic and chronicler, Royal has published a number of books, the most recent being Living the Jazz Life: Conversations with Forty Musicians About Their Careers in Jazz (Oxford University Press, 2000). He is at work on another collection of profiles for Oxford.

A Lyrical Shmooze: Alan and Marilyn Bergman Part One

"One day around 1970, Johnny knocked on our door unannounced," Alan Bergman said. And when Alan and I are talking, there is only one "Johnny" and that's Mercer. Absolutely devoid of jealousy, John was a generous mentor and immense help to many other lyricists, including Jay Livingston and Ray Evans, Peggy Lee, and Alan and Marilyn Bergman. "He came in," Alan recounted. "He said, 'Is Marilyn upstairs?' I said, 'Yes.' He said, 'Would you ask her to come down?' She came downstairs. He said, 'I just want to tell you two that I think *The Windmills of Your Mind* is the definitive song of the 1960s,' and then left. That's all. Nothing else. He just left. We don't tell that story much."

"It seems a little self-serving," Marilyn said.

"We were just flabbergasted," Alan said.

"Higher praise you're not going to get," Marilyn said. "That blunted Reagan's statement that it was the definitive *drug* song of the '60s."

"So it seems self-seeking? So?" I said. "John said of one of my songs, 'That sure is some elegant lyric. It made me cry. I wish I'd written it.' And that was *it*. No praise for the rest of my life would ever mean as much as that of Johnny Mercer."

"He was the most versatile of all lyricists," Alan said, "the best of those we study and appreciate. He could write anything. He could be very funny. He wrote a lot about lost youth. The images and the metaphors were just marvelous. I'm amazed every time I hear his work."

"The first sheet music I ever bought was a song of John's, a song called *Lost*. 'Lost, a heart as good as new; lost, the moment I met you. Lost or strayed or stolen away, finders keepers, losers weepers.' I was about ten or eleven years old. I heard it on the radio and said to my folks, 'I have to go out and get that.' So his influence on me started very young."

Later, I looked the song up. It's one of John's that I've never heard. It was published in 1936.

I can tell you exactly how long I've known Alan and Marilyn Bergman. I met them at John Williams' thirty-fifth birthday party, February 8, 1966, because it was at that party that I met Mercer. And, Alan and I have since deduced, we must have met then.

Alan Bergman is my best telephone buddy. We talk a lot. And what we talk a lot about is songwriting. He is one of the few persons with whom I ever discuss it at a technical level.

The age of great songwriting is gone. If you consult *The Great Song Thesaurus*, published by Oxford University Press, and look up the important songs over the years, you can see the—era of literate and intelligent American songwriting rise to a flood in the 1920s and continue through the next two decades. It begins to die with the decline of the big bands and the transfer of interest of the major radio networks to the new medium of television, leaving local radio to its own resources, its disc jockeys, and eventually the Top Forty format devised in New Orleans by Todd Storz of Storz Broadcasting. The decline accelerated through the 1950s, with fewer and fewer good songs finding their way to the public, and reaches the present nadir of rap and rape and mayhem and the hideous songs nominated every year for the Academy Award.

Alan and Marilyn are unique. They have managed to continue writing literate songs at the highest level well into our age of ubiquitous garbage. They have done it by making

a niche for themselves in movies. They have won (back in the era when good songs were still heard in films) three Academy Awards: for *The Way We Were*, written with Marvin Hamlisch, *The Windmills of Your Mind*, written with Michel Legrand, and the score for *Yentl*, also written with Legrand.

This conversation occurred at the lovely antique-crowded home Alan and Marilyn have in Beverly Hills. More specifically it occurred in a back office of the second floor. In front of it is a much larger office with two assistants and a lot of equipment. Marilyn said, "This is ASCAP's office."

Marilyn is president of ASCAP and chairman of the board, and she is often away in Washington, because of pending copyright legislation. There is also pending a complex Supreme Court case that puts all our songs, all our copyrights, all are incomes at risk. But that is another discussion, and what I was talking with Alan and Marilyn about that recent afternoon was, as usual, songs, and their own extraordinary role in American songwriting. We talked about the great writers of that (there is nothing else to call it) Golden Age of the craft, now gone, leaving them in the position of being bright anachronisms.

The lyrics of Alan and Marilyn Bergman — and though each of them is a trained musician, they rarely write music — include *Nice 'n' Easy*, *Sleep Warm*, *That Face*, *The Windmills of Your Mind*, *What Are you Doing the Rest of Your Life?*, *Little Boy Lost*, *Summer Me Winter Me*, *The Summer Knows*, *Make Me Rainbows*, *Where Do You Start?*, *Like a Lover*, *You Must Believe in Spring*, *The Way We Were*, *A Child Is Born*, *Cinnamon and Clove*, *How Do You Keep the Music Playing?*, *I Have the Feeling I've Been Here Before*, *In the Heat of the Night*, *Look Around*, *So Many Stars*, *The Summer Knows*, *The Trouble with Hello Is Goodbye*, and the score for *Yentl*. There is no body of work in the post-Porter-Arlen et al era to equal it.

I said, "The influences of those people, Kern, Gershwin, Dorothy Fields, form your esthetics. They shape the way you think."

"Well!" Marilyn asserted. "It sets a bar. When you hear greatness, you either say, 'Oh well I'm not going to even try to do that, I'm going to go and get a job in a shoe store.' Or it sets a standard that all your life you try to even approach. That's the value of masters. They set a kind of ideal that you always aspire to. And Johnny Mercer was a master, there's no question."

"Yeah," I said. "And everybody forgets Howard Dietz." Dietz, whose chief writing partner was Arthur Schwartz, is a particular idol of mine. His catalogue is immense, in part

including: *I Guess I'll Have to Change My Plan*, *Something to Remember You By*, *New Sun in the Sky*, *Alone Together*, *A Shine on Your Shoes*, *Louisiana Hayride*, *If There Is Someone Lovelier than You*, *You and the Night and the Music*, *Love Is a Dancing Thing*, *By Myself*, *I See Your Face Before Me*, *Rhode Island Is Famous for You*, *Triplets*, and the uncannily brilliant *That's Entertainment*, all three choruses of which — Arthur Schwartz told me — Dietz tossed off in one hour. (Dietz also wrote a song I've never heard called *Smokin' Reefers*.)

"And Leo Robin," Alan said. "He's another lyricist people forget." Leo Robin, who had studied law in his native Pittsburgh, had an early career as a newspaper reporter; Dietz began as an advertising copywriter. Robin wrote *Louise*, *True Blue Lou*, *Beyond the Blue Horizon*, *My Ideal*, *Prisoner of Love*, *Love in Bloom*, *With Every Breath I Take*, *June in January*, *Love Is Just Around the Corner*, *Whispers in the Dark*, *Easy Living*, *Thanks for the Memory*, *Faithful Forever*, *Oh the Pity of It All*, *No Love No Nothin'*, *Up with the Lark*, *In Love in Vain*, *A Gal in Calico*, *A Rainy Night in Rio*, *What's Good About Goodbye?*, *It Was Written in the Stars*, *Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend*, and *Lost in Loveliness*. Again, as with Dietz, that is only a partial list.

"Those people," I said, "their use of language shaped our use of language. If you want to know what's wrong with the grammar of the television news writers and announcers, listen to the songs they grew up on."

Marilyn said, "Aside from the theater writers, even the Tin Pan Alley songwriters — and I say that with affection — were very good. Al Dubin. You can't get a lot better than that."

"Interesting thing," she reflected. "Southern writers. American literature would be bereft without the Southern writers. Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty. You could go on and on. And John Mercer is in that group. It is a story-telling tradition that is peculiar to the American south. His was the combination. He could be that regional voice, but then could be the most elegant poet as in *Skylark*."

"And how about *Once Upon a Summertime*?" I said. "His French sensitivity."

Alan said, "The score that he and Harold Arlen wrote for *St. Louis Woman* . . . I saw the original. One song after another. *I Had Myself a True Love*, *Come Rain or Come Shine*, *It's a Gentleman's Prerogative*, *Sleep Peaceful, Mr. Used-to-Be*, *Li'l Augie is a Natural Man*, *Legalize My Name*, *Any Place I Hang My Hat Is Home*.

"But it was not a great show," Marilyn said.

"Johnny never had a great show," I said. "He had some good songs in second-rate shows."

Alan said, "One of the things that held back *St. Louis Woman* was that in the first fifteen minutes, nothing happened. You couldn't catch up to the audience after that."

"I hate to blame book writers," Marilyn said. "It's so hard to get a guy to write a book for a musical."

"Yeah," I said. "Somebody like Abe Burrows in *Guys and Dolls*. And Hammerstein really understood book."

"Alan Lerner didn't do too badly," Marilyn said.

I said, "I have some reservations about Lerner as a book writer. When he did *My Fair Lady*, he had a text by George Bernard Shaw and the collaboration of Moss Hart. When he did book on his own, it wasn't that good. *Camelot* wasn't that good, but the problem was insoluble. It's such a downer ending. Moss Hart saved that show. *Love Life* is terrible. And the book for *Paint Your Wagon* isn't too swift either. But what Abe Burrows did for *Guys and Dolls* was masterful."

"That's the primer on book writing," Marilyn said.

Alan added: "Also Arthur Laurents, on *Gypsy*. That's a wonderful book."

"And let's not forget Frank Loesser himself," Marilyn said.

I said, "Yeah. He did book, music, and lyrics on *The Most Happy Fella*. So overlooked."

"I love it, I love it," Marilyn said.

"A masterpiece," Alan said. "I knew the pianist who was his musical secretary all through *The Most Happy Fella*, a kid I went to grammar school with, named Tommy Goodman. He was a musical secretary for Frank. Milt Raskin, who played piano for Tommy Dorsey, came out here and did that for Johnny for a long time."

"Just before I met Marilyn in 1955, John said to me, 'I'm producing an album with Bing Crosby and Louis Armstrong. Write a duet for them.' I said, 'Okay, I'll try.' And I did. It was called *Let's Sing Like a Dixieland Band*. It afforded each of them space to scat sing. It was give and take."

"John said, 'That's exactly what I want.' We get on the date, and I'm a kid, and this is Bing Crosby and Louis Armstrong. Bing Crosby comes over to me and says, 'Alan, I love your song. But I can't sing scat with The Man — Louis Armstrong. Is there any way you can rewrite it so that I don't have to do any of the scat singing?' John sees me sweating, and he comes over to me and says, 'Welcome to show business, kid.' I figured out a way to do it. That was 1955."

"Okay. Now we get to a question I've always wanted to

ask you," I said. "How do two people write a lyric together?"

Alan laughed. "Carefully."

"Carefully," Marilyn echoed. "Somebody once said it was like three people making a baby. A lot of people have done it. Livingston and Evans. De Sylva, Brown, and Henderson. But not over a period of forty-some years exclusively with each other. I can't separate it from our whole relationship, from our lives."

"It seems to me that any collaboration, whether it's somebody writing a lyric and somebody writing a tune, depends on trust. You've got to trust the other person enough to say stupid things to get to where you want to go. You have to wade through a lot of stupidity sometimes, cutting your way through the jungle of dumb things, and not be afraid that your collaborator is going to judge you. So there has to be that kind of trust. Alan knows I'm not stupid. I know he's certainly not stupid. So, that's out of the way."

"Respect. There has to be respect for your partner."

"It seems to me that they're the same elements that go into a good marriage or any good relationship. We bring that to collaboration. And when you have that kind of trust and respect and history together, there's a kind of mind reading that goes on. There's a kind of finishing the other's sentences. We can sit silently for five or ten minutes, just thinking about what the problem is and — this happens so often that it's spooky — at the end of this long silence, we will both be at the same place. We will both come up with, if not the same word or line, something in the same neighborhood, very far afield from where we left off ten minutes before. But whatever the journey was from the last spoken exchange to the next, we were following the same bread-crumbs trail, because we would get to the same place. I think it's something that happens when two people work together, live together, for all these years."

Alan said, "And it's pitching and catching. One is the creative one, and the other is the editor. And those roles change within seconds, back and forth. And then we sing. Most of the time we write to a melody. We prefer that."

"If you don't do that," I said, "you get doggerel."

"Exactly," Marilyn said. "Rhyming couplets."

"We sing," Alan said. "The function of a lyric is to sing. We play the tapes over and sing. And then, once you get the first draft, you start rewriting, making it better."

Marilyn said, "Until they take it away from you. But I don't know, I have to think that writing by yourself has got to be very lonely, really lonely."

"It is," I said. "I assure you, it is. I envy you that."

"We have the loneliness licked," Alan said, laughing. "And also we don't have to make appointments."

Marilyn said, "And also all the disclaimers you don't have to make. You don't have to say such things as, 'This is just off the top of my head, I haven't really thought this through,' and all the other stuff we say if there is a third person in the room, even if that third person is a composer with whom we've worked for years and years. We don't like working with someone else in the room."

I said, "Neither did Johnny, as you know, and neither do I. John would take the tune that Harold Arlen or someone else had done and go away. Apparently John could do that without a tape recorder. They didn't have tape recorders in those earlier days. He'd just get up and walk out of the room, carrying the tune in his head and come back two days later with the lyric. When I am asked, 'How do you write lyrics?' I say, 'You don't. You find them.'"

"Yes," Alan said. "The words are right on the tips of those notes."

Marilyn said, "In the Galleria in Florence, there are two rows of sculptures, *The Slaves*, by Michelangelo. He died before finishing them. They line the approach to the statue of David. And they are huge, they must be ten feet high at least. And because they're not finished, they look like bodies struggling to get out of the marble. They're extraordinary. There must be six or eight on each side of this passageway. He said, as a sculptor, 'There's a body in there.' I think he said an elephant. And he said, I just have to chip away everything that's not an elephant. What a thought that is! And it is like that, writing lyrics. There's something in there."

"And if you get it right," I said, "the words match the inflections of the melody."

"Absolutely," Marilyn said.

"They have to," Alan said. "Songwriters, words and music, there's a chemistry that has to work. I remember John told me that some people he worked with, there were no sparks. He had great respect for Arthur Schwartz, but it didn't happen between them."

Marilyn said, "Look at the story he told about *I'm Old Fashioned*. He brought Jerome Kern this lyric and Kern put it up on the piano, and he went through it, and he said, 'It fits.' And that was the whole comment on that lyric. And it sure does fit!"

"You couldn't change a dot on a quarter note with Kern," Alan said.

"But the melodies are so perfect," I said, "why would you want to? They're awesome."

"They are," Marilyn said.

Alan said, "When I finished graduate school here at UCLA, and went back east, I had no money. I had to find a way to support my songwriting habit.

"I got a job as an assistant director in television and then I became a director. I was at WCAU in Philadelphia. John came to Philadelphia with *Top Banana*. I called him at the hotel and said, 'Why don't we do a whole hour on television about the show?' He said, 'Terrific. It will get people into the theater.' We did an hour, with some of the cast, and talked about the show and the problems of trying out a show. When the TV show was over, it was about eleven o'clock in the morning. And he said, 'Alan, have you been writing?'

"I said, 'Yeah.' He said, 'Well let's go hear some.'

"I said, 'You've got a show that's trying out.'

"He said, 'I've always got time for you.'

"We went into a studio and I played and sang stuff for him for a couple of hours. He would criticize. I said, 'John, hadn't you better go?' I felt so guilty. He said, 'No, it's okay, they're rehearsing.' That was, I think, '52. He said, 'You've got to come back to California. You've got to be a songwriter.' I said, 'John, I'm only doing this to save money so that I can support my songwriting habit.'

"I was so in awe of him."

Marilyn said, "How could you not be in awe?"

"And I loved the way he sang," Alan said.

"I remember being at Gene De Paul's house when they were working on *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*," Marilyn said. "Gene was a very good piano player, and also a very good singer. I remember the first time he sang *Spring, Spring, Spring*, with all those endless inventions, chorus after chorus. And songs that didn't find their way into the picture. There was one called *You Take After Your Mother*, and another song called *Some Place of Our Own*. I was blown away just being there. I think I was taken there by Bob Russell. That's how I first met John, at their house. I remember that so clearly. How brilliant those songs were. Later, John and Gene De Paul did *Li'l Abner*."

"Now," I said, "how did you two get teamed up? From the top. Ladies first."

"Alan and I were both born in Brooklyn Jewish Hospital," Marilyn said. "I went to public school in Brooklyn and then I went to the High School of Music and Art. I was a music student. By the time I was about sixteen, graduating, and going to college, I realized I was never going to be good enough or *disciplined* enough to be a concert pianist. I knew

too well how it should go and how it should sound. I knew I would be leading myself into pits of frustration and heartache. I was a psyche major, and I was pre-med for a while. English literature. Just dabbling. Four-and-half years of going to college, and I never did get a degree. I never put the credits together in the right way. I knew that whatever I did, I would not need a degree for it. Someday maybe I'd like to get one."

I told them, "Nick Perito told me that some years ago when he was working on something with Perry Como, he said, 'Perry, why don't you sing some of those high pianissimos, like you used to do?' And Como said, 'Nick, I've already got the gig.' What's the story I heard about you and Mark Rydell and *Ornithology*?" Mark Rydell is of course the New York-born movie director responsible for *The Reivers*, *The Rose*, *On Golden Pond*, and *The Cowboys*, in which he elicited one of the most convincing performances John Wayne ever did. But he began life as a pianist, who studied at Juilliard; I met him through Gerry Mulligan, who was a mutual friend.

Marilyn said, "I went to the University of Vermont for a while, and then I came down to NYU. It was a class in classics, Latin and Greek in current use. And the instructor at one point said something about *rara avis*. And he said, '*Rara* obviously means *rare*, but does anybody know what *avis* means?' Somebody said, 'Bird.' And I started to hum *Ornithology*, and Mark who was sitting in back of me, tapped me on the shoulder and said, 'I've got to talk to you outside.' And he said, 'How did you know that?' I said, 'Charlie Parker.' We became fast friends. We still are.

"He had been a jazz pianist. He was with Charlie Ventura for a while. He decided that that life wasn't for him. He was kind of floundering around, as a lot of us were, deciding what we wanted to be when we grew up. It was clear that he had performing talents. And I knew a guy who was an acting student at the Neighborhood Playhouse. I knew all good things about the Group Theater and Lee Strasberg and Sandy Meisner. So I said to Mark, 'The Neighborhood Playhouse sounds like a very interesting place.' I think we were both in analysis too. Separately, of course. All of the kind of self-exploration and digging that the Playhouse was famous for. I said, 'Why don't you go there? You could be an actor, certainly.' So he went to the Neighborhood Playhouse, and he became an actor, and he became a director. And he still plays pretty good piano!

"I was friendly in high school with a girl by the name of Marilyn Jackson, who later became a very good group singer. She had an aunt named Hannah who was married to a songwriter named Bob Russell. He was very successful, and

a great lyric writer — uncelebrated, for how good he really was.”

Bob Russell, born in Passaic, New Jersey, in 1914, worked as an advertising copywriter — like both Tom Adair and Howard Dietz — and then wrote special material and songs for films. He wrote with just about everybody, from Harry Warren to Bobby Scott. His lyrics include among other things *Frenesi*, *Maria Elena*, *Brazil*, *Time Was*, *Don't Get Around Much Any More*, *I Didn't Know About You*, *Do Nothin' Till You Hear from Me*, *Ballerina*, *No Other Love*, *You Came a Long Way from St. Louis*, *Blue Gardenia*, *Crazy She Calls Me*, and, with Bobby Scott, *He's Not Heavy, He's My Brother*. ”

“Bob and Hannah,” Marilyn said, “had an apartment on Riverside Drive near 86th Street. Marilyn Jackson took me up there, and I used to go there with her constantly. I became very enamored of the whole world of song-writing. Well, I fell down a flight of steps and broke my shoulders. My parents lived out here and I came out here to recuperate. I never had any intention of coming to California. I came out once and I didn't like it.”

“A true New York attitude,” I said.

“But I had to come out here to recover,” she continued. “The only people I knew here were Hannah and Bob Russell. I said, ‘What do I *do* out here?’ I was looking at six months of being in a cast like this.” She crossed her forearms, hands to her shoulders. “Bob said, ‘Why don't you write songs?’ I said, ‘I can't even turn the pages of a book to read. How am I going to play the piano?’

“So he said, ‘Well, write lyrics. You can talk those into a tape recorder. This was 1954 or '55.

“I said, ‘Who am I going to write with?’

“He said, ‘There's a young composer who's playing piano at a club called the Gourmet in Beverly Hills. And he wants to write with me. But I don't have time.

“I said to Bob, ‘I don't know anything about writing songs.’ He said, ‘Of course you do. You couldn't have hung around me all those years and all those other songwriters, Carl Sigman and Joe McCarthy, without learning something.

“The composer was Lew Spence. Bob said, ‘He's coming over here tomorrow. Come and meet him. So I went. And I wrote a lyric, and I gave it to Lew. And he wrote a very nice tune to it.

“Bob was working in his little studio out in his garage. And Sidney Goldstein of the Buddy Morris office was out there. Bob said, ‘Come out here and play that song for Sid.’ Sid said, ‘Come into the office tomorrow and play it for

Buddy.’ We went in the next day and played it for Buddy. It was like in a movie. Gordon Jenkins was in the next room, getting material for an album he was cutting with Peggy Lee. Gordon heard the song, and told Peggy, ‘We'll do this on the session.’ *It was the first song I'd ever written.* Lew had written before, but I hadn't. We got a fifteen hundred dollar advance. I thought, ‘This is like taking candy from a baby. This is ridiculous.’

“Peggy had a terrible cold at the session. So a couple of the songs didn't come out until years later. But! Barbara Ruick, who was then Johnny Williams' wife, recorded the song. I never even knew that Nina Simone recorded the song, and has done it all through her career. It's called *That's Him Over There*. You never heard it. Nobody ever heard it. Except a friend of mine, Gary Goldberg, a television producer and writer who is a Nina Simone *freak*, looked at the label of an album of hers. And he said, ‘M. Keith.’ That was the name I was using. He said, ‘Was that you?’ I said, ‘On what?’ And he said, *That's Him Over There*. And I said, ‘Yeah. It was the first song I ever wrote.’ Gary had been a waiter at the Village Vanguard when she was there. He said, ‘Every time she would do the song, everything would stop. It was one of her signature songs.

“So that was how I became a songwriter. Lew and I continued writing. Two or three years went by, and nothing happened. He was writing with a lyric writer in the morning and with me in the afternoon. And one day he said he thought his morning lyric writer should meet his afternoon lyric writer. So he brought his morning lyric writer over to my house. And *this*,” she said, nodding toward Alan, “was his morning lyric writer. And we got together, and started writing, and we got married, and here we are.”

“Now, your turn,” I said to Alan.

“I went to a wonderful grammar school,” Alan said, “which is, I think, one of the reasons I'm sitting here. It was the Brooklyn Ethical Culture School. The arts were featured. The periods were an hour and a half long, math an hour and a half, history an hour and a half. If you did your lesson within an hour, you had a half hour, and you'd go to the teacher and say, ‘Can I go to the music room?’ There would be a teacher there, who'd say, ‘What do you want to hear today? Mozart? Or Brahms?’ Or whatever.”

To be continued

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