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A Lyrical Shmooze: Alan and Marilyn Bergman

Part Two

"The Ethical Culture School was just terrifically encouraging," Alan Bergman said. "Betty Comden went there. The man who is now the dean of the Yale music school went there. A lot of people in the arts. And then I went to public high school, Abraham Lincoln High School, which is in the Coney Island section of Brooklyn. I wrote some shows there, musicals. And also we had a band, and the fellow I mentioned before, Tommy Goodman, was the piano player. Dave Pell, the saxophone player, who was Dave Pellowitz, and Buddy Rich's brother Mickey, who was a saxophone player. We played bar mitzvahs and jobs like that.

"Then I went to college, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I studied music, but the reason I went there is that they had a wonderful drama department called The Playmakers. If you wrote a musical, they would put it on if they liked it.

"Then the war came and I went into the army. We were losing the war. When I was eighteen, they drafted me. I went to the infantry, because that's what they needed. I was lucky. We were out on maneuvers in Mississippi and some fellow in the group was taking up shells off the firing range. Some of the fellows would polish them up so they could make lighters out of them and send them home. This fellow was polishing up an anti-tank shell that had been fired but not detonated. And he dropped it. Everything in the hut, the stove and the cots, all became shrapnel. It broke my right arm and a piece of shrapnel went through my kneecap. I was in the hospital for about three months, and then they made me limited service. I couldn't go anywhere. Because I had two years of college by now, and was a music major, they sent me to a special service outfit and they made me staff arranger for a big band. The instrumentation was like a Basie band. I knew very little about how to do that, but I tried. A man named Jack Marshall, a terrific guitar player, was in the band. In fact, when he was sixteen he was the MGM staff guitar player. He taught me, he was very nice to me. He came back and he was one of three music directors with John Mercer with Capitol Records. In fact, his son Frank is a producer on many of the Spielberg pictures.

"So I learned a great deal about orchestration and arranging from Jack. When I came back, I had the GI Bill, so I went back to Chapel Hill and I graduated, and then I went to graduate school here at UCLA."

"Chapel Hill was Kay Kyser's home town," I said.

"Yeah," Alan said. "Let me digress for a moment."

Marilyn said, "I love this story."

"When I was eleven or twelve, at the Paramount Theater in New York, they had bands and movies. And Kay Kyser was the band there at the time. And when you walked in, they took your ticket, and the ticket went into a fish bowl. Then the stage would come up, and they reached into the bowl and picked out six numbers, who would be contestants in the Kay Kyser Kollege of Musical Knowledge. And my number came up. So I walked down there and the usher said, 'You're too young, you can't go up there.' Kay Kyser came over and said, 'What's the trouble,' and the usher said I was too young, and Kay Kyser said, 'Never mind, come up here, kid.' He asked me what two drummers left to form bands of their own, and I said Skinnay Ennis had left Hal Kemp and Gene Krupa had left Benny Goodman. And I won ten dollars! I brought home ten dollars and I gave it to my mother.

"Now. Dissolve. Now it's 1947, and I wrote a musical at the college, and I wrote the orchestrations and I conducted the orchestra and everything, and sitting in the audience was Kay Kyser. At the end of the show he came up to congratulate me. He said he liked it. I told him this story, and he laughed and said, 'I can't believe it.' He was very nice.

"I finished school there, and then I came out here to UCLA. On the GI Bill, you could go to school for a long time!"

I said, "If there ever was a perfect argument for socialism, it was the GI Bill. Free education, right up through college, and it transformed America."

"Absolutely!"

"That and the Marshall Plan," Marilyn said.

Alan said, "It was fantastic."

"Yeah," I said, "it took hillbilly boys who would never have had a chance at education and turned them into famous attorneys and other things. They had it in Canada too, and there has never been anything like it."

"You know something, when I came out here again, I was going to graduate school, I told that story to Harry Babbitt, who sang for Kay Kyser."

"And a very good singer," I said.

"He had a radio show out here. He was a lovely man. I went to see him, and I went through the whole thing about meeting him years ago. He was so sweet."

"Yeah the hip — or hep — people made fun of Kay Kyser, but that actually was a very good band."

"*Very*," Alan said. "Ish Kabibble was a very good trumpet player."

"He was. He had that funny bowl haircut, but he really was a good trumpet player. Real name Merwyn Bogue. When that band occasionally did an instrumental — they recorded a thing, as I recall, called *It's Sand, Man* — you heard how good it was."

"He had good arrangers," Alan said. "George Duning was one of them. We later wrote a song with George Duning for *Any Wednesday*."

"And what next?"

"Well, during the time I was in graduate school, I worked like a gopher for a man called Charles Vanda, who produced the Abbot and Costello radio show. And one of his friends was Leo Robin. He introduced us.

"When Leo was writing the songs for *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* with Jule Styne, he was wonderful to me as a mentor. A sweet man, he was. In *Gentleman Prefer Blondes*, there's a song called *Mamie Is Mimi*. Leo wrote all those songs to the music. When you write a ballad or something to the music, that's okay. But when you write comedy to the music, that's *hard*. And he wrote *Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend* to the music!"

Marilyn said, "Can you imagine — *Little Girl from Little Rock* to the music?"

Alan said, "In *Mamie Is Mimi*, listen to the way he satisfies the syncopation in the bridge:

With a terrific sense of humor,
and a tight dress,
she was a hit the day she hit Paree.

But there's a most persistent rumor,
She'll never say yes,
Never say yes,
only will say 'oui, oui, oui.'

"He wrote that to the music."

I said, "Comedy songs *can be* written before the music."

"Oh yeah!" Alan said.

"Most of the time," I said, "they have to be."

"But Leo wrote those songs for *Gentleman Prefer Blondes* to the music! People don't realize that he wrote the first hit Bing Crosby ever had, *Please*. There's a score for a movie *Casbah*, which he wrote with Harold Arlen: *It Was Written in the Stars, What's Good about Goodbye, Hooray for Love, For Every Man There's a Woman.* What a score! And what a sweet man. He used to call us up and say, 'I'm so proud of you.'

"I spent a year in graduate school. I didn't get a master's degree. I went to Philadelphia. Charles Vanda, who introduced me to Leo Robin, became vice president of WCAU, the biggest CBS owned and operated TV station in the country, which is how I happened to go there.

"I met John when I was in graduate school, but I don't remember who introduced us. It could have been that day at Ira Gershwin's house. Somebody took me over there. But I just don't remember.

"I worked at WCAU for three years. I made enough money that I could quit and come back here . . . ."

"To lead a very Spartan life," Marilyn said.

"Yes. I didn't have a car. I walked everywhere. I took buses and walked. I had a one-room house in Hollywood, and it was just around Highland above Hollywood Boulevard, so I could walk to what was then Tin Pan Alley.

"On Vine Street between Hollywood and Argyle, that's where Tin Pan Alley was in those days. John had an office right next to Nicodell's on Argyle, next to the Buddy Morris office, and up one flight.

"I was writing music. I was working with a lyricist named Hal Levy. Johnny took one of the songs to Walter Schuman, who had a chorus. And he recorded a song we wrote called *Whoo-ee Loo-ee-siana*. The Modernaires also recorded it. And then I went back east, and because of what John said, I came back here and the mentoring began.

"Every few months he would call and say, 'Come on,' and he'd take me down to Newport Beach. When I started to write with Lew Spence, it was because he was writing better tunes than I was. I didn't have that kind of ego.

"I met Marilyn. The first song we wrote was simply

terrible. But we enjoyed the process. Because we've never stopped writing since. That was the end of 1956. In addition to writing with Lew, we were writing a lot of children's songs. We wrote many with Norman Luboff."

Marilyn said, "We got to be very good friends with him, his wife, his family."

"Can you imagine anything like the Norman Luboff Choir today?" I said.

"No!" Marilyn said. "It was wonderful. He had a deal with Golden Records to produce children's albums, and he had his own deal with Columbia Records to record the choir. I started working with him, writing children's songs for Golden Records, and writing some for the chorus. I wrote some songs with Paul Weston. Paul and Jo were very good friends of Norman, and I met them together. Alan and I wrote several albums for Norman. He was doing *Songs of the West* and *Songs of the South*, and an album to be called *Songs of the Caribbean*, during the interest in calypso in the late '50s. Columbia wanted him to make a calypso album, like, next week, and there were to be twelve songs. We were researching authentic folk songs and writing English settings and original lyrics. And in the calypso album, we found a lot of Haitian songs, things from Trinidad. One of them was a traditional melody that wasn't long enough, so Norman wrote a bridge, and we wrote a lyric. We were right up against the wire. He was writing the arrangements and we were feeding him the songs, then we went right into the studio. We looked at the lyric to the last song, and it was in some kind of French patois. We knew it had something to do with a bird, because the word *oiseau* was there. So we said, 'Okay, we'll right a song about a bird.' *Purple* bird, *orange* bird. Yellow bird! That sounds better. So we wrote a song called *Yellow Bird*. There was another song that we wrote in that album that had a melody by Norman, called *Woman Sweet*. We thought that of all the songs, that was the one that could have some kind of independent life in the pop world. A friend, Stu Ostrow, was running Frank Loesser's company out here, Frank Music. We played him the songs. And to his credit, I guess, he said, 'No, that's not the song. *Yellow Bird* is the song. 'Yellow bird, up high in a banana tree . . . .'" He played the song for Frank Loesser, and Frank said, 'That's a hit song.'

"It was a hit song three times. Three different records were number one records all over the world.

"Lew Spence had a relationship with Hank Sanicola. And he said, 'The Sinatra people would like us to try' — it was a contest, an open call — 'to write a song for an album that would be sort of relaxed swinging ballads.' So with Lew Spence we wrote a song called *Nice 'n' Easy*.

"And then we got a call from someone at Fox. They wanted us to write a song like *Nice 'n' Easy* for some Z picture that they were doing."

Alan said, "Frank Loesser flew Marilyn and me and Lew Spence to New York. He had the publishing on *Yellow Bird*. He wanted to put us under contract. We said — we were kind of nervy, I guess — 'You have two teams of writers who are writing under contract to you. They're writing a lot like you.'"

Marilyn told Loesser: "And they'll never be you. Ever."

Alan continued, "We told him, 'We don't know who we are yet. And, with great respect, we would like to find out before we are influenced.' We said it as nicely as we could. He had heard a song of ours called *I've Never Left Your Arms*, which said I've been everywhere, done everything, but I've never left your arms. He wanted us to change the end of it but we felt that it was how he might have written it and we felt strongly about the way the song developed. We needed the money, but we said no. And about a year later Jule Styne heard something, and said, 'I want you to write a Broadway show with Sammy Fain.' We wrote it, it opened, and it was a flop. It was called *Something More*. It was not a pleasant experience. But we learned a lot about ourselves. They switched directors in Philadelphia, and in ten days we wrote eight songs.

"We came back here and we really scuffled. Then in 1966, there was a knock on our door, and it was Quincy Jones. He said, 'Would you like to write some songs with me for *In the Heat of the Night*?' It was for Norman Jewison, whose next picture was *The Thomas Crown Affair*, for which we wrote with Michel Legrand *The Windmills of Your Mind*. Then we were okay, because we won the Academy Award."

Marilyn said, "But that knock on the door from Quincy, to write a song for Ray Charles. That was a turning point in our careers."

"It was the end of the Golden Age," I said.

Marilyn said, "You know, it *was* the Golden Age. No question. And we'll never see its like again."

"The circumstances that made it aren't there," I said. "Network radio is gone. We grew up on people like Rodgers and Hart. It shaped our use of language. I would listen to records and the radio and wonder why I liked some songs more than others."

"Because they were better," Marilyn said.

"Yeah," I said, "and I started reading the fine print below the title on records and finding out who wrote the song. I

started that pretty early."

"It was such a rich culture," Alan said. "Marilyn and I, unbeknownst to each other, our mothers took us from Brooklyn to Carnegie Hall every Saturday morning. There were free concerts, the Philharmonic. The conductor was Walter Damrosch. My mother schlepped me every Saturday, and one Saturday we came back and my brother said to me, 'I'm going to take you to Carnegie Hall tomorrow night.' I said, 'Sunday night? There's no children's concert then.' He said, 'I'm taking you there.' And in the third balcony, in 1938, I was at the Benny Goodman concert. People coming out like Basie, and Jess Stacy, I can still see that night."

I said, "The culture was disseminated to all of North America by the radio networks, NBC and CBS particularly. I was listening to the Metropolitan Opera with my grandmother on Saturday afternoons."

"Milton Cross," Marilyn said.

"And the Toscanini broadcasts, and the Woody Herman band, and all those remotes."

"That famous studio at NBC, 8-H," Marilyn said. "I was there many times."

I said, "It was a short period, historically. From about 1928, and it was over by 1948. For a brief period there, those networks educated this continent, and raised the level of taste."

"How rich it was!" Alan said. "My aunt and uncle had two friends who were in Toscanini's orchestra, the first cellist, named Alan Schulman, and his brother, who was first chair in the viola section. And every Monday, they would leave me a pass, so that I could get into the studios. And every Monday I would come from Brooklyn. Benny Goodman had the *Camel Caravan*. For me, it was the best band Benny ever had. It was Eddie Sauter's band. Mel Powell was playing piano, also writing for him. Lou McGarrity and Cutty Cutshall were the trombones. Johnny Best was the lead trumpet player, Chris Griffin. Artie Bernstein was playing bass, Nick Fatool was the drummer. And the first time they ever ran down *Benny Rides Again*, I was there. I came home and I told my brother, 'I never heard such music in my life.' Unbelievable music. But every Monday, for a whole season!"

I said, "Anybody who grew up in New York had a running head start on any of us from elsewhere. But even at that, thanks to those networks, we were hearing this magnificent stuff and it was informing the communal ear. I think I got that phrase from Jim Maher and Alec Wilder."

"That's right!" Marilyn said.

"If you look at letters of guys writing home from the Civil War, they were so literate. And the same in World War II. You could not get that today, because the American ear has been shaped and formed by rock-and-roll."

"That's right," Marilyn said again.

"Aside from what we learned in school, we had to all be absorbing a sense of language from songs like *Old Black Magic*."

"Those guys were so good!" Alan said.

Marilyn said, "There are not too many people writing lyrics like that these days."

"Dave Frishberg," I said. "And Randy Newman. And a girl in Toronto named Shirley Eikhard, who is a really different and original lyricist as well as an arranger and excellent singer. But she hasn't had anything like the recognition she deserves."

Marilyn said, "Dave Frishberg's become kind of cult figure in New York cafes. He's a fine writer."

I said, "People say to me, 'Why aren't you writing songs these days?' I say, 'For whom? We don't have the singers, and the few we do have sell twelve copies.' And there are no radio stations to present them. AM has abandoned music almost completely, and FM is mostly trash. And the NPR stations pay no royalties. Why write them? I got into it too late. The culture was changing very rapidly."

Marilyn said, "Imagine never having the opportunity to write for Garland, and Astaire in those pictures with Rogers. We grew up on them but we never had the chance to write for them."

Alan said, "In 1960, Marilyn and I wrote a concept album with Paul Weston for Jo Stafford, called *The Ballad of the Blues*. It was in four movements. It was a wonderful experience. In 1961, Jo went to London to star in thirteen one-hour television variety shows. It was the first light entertainment that ATV had done. She called and said, Would we write the show? We went to London with Jo and Paul. We wrote all the sketches and all the continuity. Paul wrote the music. It was a great experience for us, because every musical or variety performer — Peggy Lee, Rosie Clooney, Mel Tormé, Bob Hope and Bing Crosby, you name 'em — was on those shows, and we got to write for these people. We had a wonderful time. And Jo is an extraordinary woman."

"She is a great lady," Marilyn said. "Straight as they come. She always has known who she is. She always knew what she wanted to do and what she didn't. Uncompromising. She went to bat for us."

"Because of my television experience," Alan said, "I could see in London that the director wasn't great. And Jo asked me

to go in the booth and see if I could protect her. Which I did, and the director threw me out of the booth. Jo said, 'Let's have a meeting.' And she told him, indicating me, 'If he goes, I go.' And we had no further trouble with him."

"I thought," I said, "that that era was going to go on forever. When I got my first stuff recorded by Tony Bennett and Peggy Lee, I thought, 'Wow! This is it!.' I didn't realize that whole era was being phased out.'"

"But still," Alan said, "certain opportunities still come up. We just did a song cycle at the Kennedy Center. We wrote fifteen songs with Cy Coleman."

"There is a hunger out there," Marilyn said. "We were stunned in Washington. We thought, there's a fifty-fifty chance here, of succeeding or not. Would an audience sit still for fifteen brand new songs? And some of the songs ran six or seven minutes. Without a book, without a story line. Not a musical, not really a concert either. We had the Clayton-Hamilton big band, and Patti Austin, and Lilias White, Steve Tyrell, Janis Segal, Carl Anderson. There was a little bit of a thread. Cy and Alan and I were kind of narrating the piece. It was very risky, two hours of all new material with a lot of musical information. It was so quiet I thought everybody was asleep or they'd left. But I looked out and they were there.

"When it was all over, after about two hours, there were people who told Patti and some of the other performers that they thought this was an intermission, that there was more. They were eager to come back."

"You couldn't hear a sound. Nobody coughed," Alan said. "Not a cough."

Marilyn said, "And we were writing for ourselves. We didn't care how long anything was, we didn't care what form it was. Some of the songs fall into kind of traditional forms, but most of them don't. We weren't writing for anything but to please ourselves."

"You said there was a hunger out there."

"Marilyn said. "We tapped into *something*."

Alan said, "Some people in Australia heard about it, and they want to do two concerts, in Sydney and Melbourne."

"When we had written five or six songs," Marilyn said, "Cy said, 'We're not doing all this work for just one night. There's a kind of theater piece that's happening here.' Alan said, 'Warren Leight, who wrote *Side Man,* really knows this world.' We got his phone number, and we called New York. Fifteen minutes later we were talking to him. We told him what we were doing, and asked him if he'd be interested. He said, 'Absolutely.' A week later he came to where we were working, at Cy's in New York,. He's writing some kind of frame. We told him not to try to force it into any traditional shape. It shouldn't be like that."

"We called it *Portraits in Jazz*," Alan said.

Marilyn said, "We suddenly realized that that's what we were writing, portraits of jazz players, jazz singers, jazz enthusiasts."

"The environment of jazz," Alan said.

"The other thing that happened during those years," Marilyn said, "was a string of Sinatra records. Nothing that ever did too much, except for *Nice 'n Easy.* We did a hip version of *Old Macdonald."*

"Yeah, but that made a lot of noise," Alan said.

Marilyn said, "We did a song called *Love Looks So Well on You*. We did *Sleep Warm*. There were about six of them. So we were making a little bit of a living. Not much. We would get on the back of a record of Sinatra's or in an album. Enough to keep Alan from going back into television."

"Frank was very nice to us," Alan said. "He used to call us The Kids."

"When he died," Marilyn said, "I thought, That's the last guy who'll ever call us The Kids."

"Alan said, 'He called Tony Bennett up and said, 'You've got to sing this song, *How Do You Keep the Music Playing?"*

Marilyn said, "And then came Barbra."

Alan said, "The first thing she ever song of ours was *Ask Yourself Why."*

Marilyn said, "We met her in New York when we were doing that show with Sammy Fain. Jule Styne said to us one evening, after a long day of casting, 'You've got to come down and hear this girl.' The last thing we wanted to do was go and hear 'some girl' sing. So we went down to the Bon Soir. And this girl came out. I'll never forget it as long as I live. Everything she wore, the way she looked. When she started to sing. I started to cry. I never stopped crying through the whole act.

"We went backstage and Jule introduced us in this little tiny dressing room. And I reached out to her — nowadays nobody except those near and dear reaches out to her; she was very shy — and I said to her, 'Do you know how wonderful you are?' And then I said, 'Of course you do.' Nobody could do what she did and not have a very sure sense of self."

I said, "That's a complex equation. Most of the great talent I've ever known, I've found there's a layer of security over a layer of uncertainty over a layer of security. It's like the layers of an onion."

"That's exactly right!" Marilyn said. "But the insecurity

is not necessarily about the ability itself. The insecurity is on the edges. Can I do it this time? Will I forget something? Will I trip up? But it's not about the core belief. I think that in some performers who get crazy and do stupid things with drugs, their insecurities might be very well founded. Perhaps they don't know how they got there in the first place. You can trace the steps of what you did that got you where you are. For them, one day it just happened. So if it came like that without any preparation on their part, without any learning curve, without any dues being paid, if it came like that, it could vanish like that — suddenly. And if it went suddenly, how do you get back? There's no map to get there. It's very scary, if you're thrust into stardom, and you have the world adoring you and what you do, and you really can't explain what it is or how you got there.

"The people *we're* talking about all paid dues to get there. They can trace their development."

"Do you have children?" I asked. "I've never asked."

"We have a daughter and a grand-daughter," Marilyn said.

Alan said, "Julie, our daughter, is a very successful film producer. Did you see *Washington Square*? She produced that. She was associated with *The Fabulous Baker Boys* and *Seven Days, Seven Nights,* and many other things."

"Right now she's parenting," Marilyn said, "and preparing to go back to work. She just wanted time to take care of her daughter. She's married to a wonderful guy, a writer and documentary film maker named Stuart Sender."

From time to time, Alan makes an appearance in a club, singing Bergman lyrics. He made an album in Berlin of Bergman songs on which a German producer spent about a quarter of a million dollars just because he wanted to do it. It's a very nice album but it hasn't come out here.

We fell into a conversation about dumb passages in lyrics. I cited the ending of Cole Porter's *I Concentrate on You:* "and so when wise men say to me that love's young dream never comes true . . . ." How many wise men have you known in your life? And how many said, "See here, kid, don't you know love's young dream never comes true?" Sure.

"He wrote a few like that," Marilyn said. "*True Love* never knocked me out. Nor *I Love You.* But most of them are extraordinary, and he wrote both words and music. *Begin the Beguine* is a strange lyric, but it's one of those things you take for granted, because it's been there all your life. He was certainly a genius. But getting back to Barbra, it was clear from the moment she walked out what she was."

"And look how lucky we are!" Alan said. "She's recorded over fifty songs of ours. And each one is like the definitive version of the song. The only dark side of it is that other people won't do them after she's done them. Sinatra said, 'I'm not going to follow that broad,' meaning Barbra, and it took him almost ten years to do *Summer Me, Winter Me*, and *What Are You Doing the Rest of Your Life*?"

"She did a spectacular job, as director and actress, in *Prince of Tides*," I said. "But some critics went after her for it. The trade loves to snipe at her."

Marilyn said. "*Yentl* was the first movie she ever directed. A period movie musical. I think it was the most stunning debut since *Citizen Kane*."

"Have you any idea how many songs you've had recorded?"

"No idea," Marilyn said.

"Or how many you've written?"

"I think it's over five hundred," Alan said.

"You think so?" Marilyn said skeptically. "I have no idea. And why is that something I'd want to know? I just know that this last six months, when we were working on this project with Cy, fifteen songs, there's a well of experience that you can dip into. It was very gratifying.

"And maybe it runs dry some day. I don't know."

Those two?

I don't think so.