Gene Lees Ad Libitum &

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Ghosts of the Black Forest

Part Two

Hans Georg Brunner-Schwer was unique in the history of the music business. He was the grandson of Hermann Schwer, a pioneer of the German broadcasting industry and the founder of the hardware company SABA. Hans Georg worked as a recording engineer, mixing and synchronizing motion picture sound. He became technical director of SABA and as such contributed to the development of high-quality loudspeakers and tape machines. In 1969 he established MPS records — it stands for Musik Produktion Schwarzwald, or Black Forest Music Production — devoted to recording music he personally liked, regardless of its commercial potential. He set up a studio at his home at Villingen in the Black Forest, where he recorded a great many jazz albums, allowing the artists perfect freedom. And he developed what I thought was then the best engineered sound in the industry. Some of the finest recordings Oscar Peterson ever made were done for Brunner-Schwer's label.

Oscar was the first person to pull my coat to The Singers Unlimited. He had been recording at Villingen and returned with tapes of his new album, one of two MPS Peterson recordings for which I wrote liner notes. He called me and said, "I've got something you've got to hear." It was a tape of The Singers Unlimited, and it flabbergasted me.

Don Shelton said, "We were very blessed."

Len Dresslar said, "It was the most amazing thing. So many of the times the A&R people, the producers, will say I want you to do this. Hans Georg had none of that. It was just an agreement with Gene. 'You write what you want to write, and do what you want to do. I want to record the voices. He used the term 'document.' It wasn't just to record. 'I want to document you as artists.' No one had ever heard of a guy like this. In this industry there just wasn't anybody like that."

Bonnie said, "He was like a patron, a benefactor, a mentor."

Don Shelton said, "He loved us so much that he went out and bought the Ampex 16-track, just for us. It cost one hundred and fifty thousand dollars U.S." Since this was in 1971, the sum today would probably be three or four hundred thousand dollars.

He even bought special headphones for the group.

I said, "I saw Tony Bennett forced to use them once. He tore them off and threw them at the control booth. They bounced off the glass."

Bonnie said, "Headphones are our life. We had to use them. You had to really learn how to operate with them. There are headphones and there are headphones. I remember when Hans Georg invested in the Sennheiser headphones."

Don said, "Exactly — because they were special."

Bonnie said, "You could hear acoustically in the room. We could hear each other and also hear the other tracks."

Gene said, "The manufacturers were friends of Hans Georg."

Don said, "We had the best."

"Sennheiser," Gene said, "and I forget the others that we used, they were all there. They would send over test microphones for us to beta test."

Len said, "He even got me a microphone that was built for tubas. He got a Sony C3, or something like that, and we used it. And it was great!"

Gene said, "That still sounds like the lowest, biggest C I have ever heard. Didn't we record that in the morning? Or after you smoked a pipe?"

Len said, "I am kidding. It worked better in the morning."

Every singer knows that you can hit low notes in the morning that are out of the question later in the day. Don Shelton said: "Gene used to write notes on Len's part. Occasionally, if there was a really low section, it was 'Not to be sung after 10 a.m.' Or 'Have to do this early.'"

Gene said, "One of the reasons I did was for general publishing. It was on there."

Don said, laughing, "The college kids must have had fun with that, 'Oh, sir. It says we can't sing this now. It is two o'clock in the afternoon.'"

I asked them: "How many voices did you sometimes use?"

Gene said, "We're asked that question often. I have a hard

time thinking about it because we do it with so many variables. First of all we make a beginning track starting with the four of us singing into two channels of stereo. We sing the three top voices and the two bottom voices as the first two passes of stereo. Then we would do one more, mono. And then Don and I would sing the middle two parts."

I said, "It's an incredibly rich sound. The amazing thing about it is on the close intervals, the seconds and things. And everyone's in tune! That's hard to do!"

Len said, "Well, I'm not going to deny that! Yes, it was!"

Don said, "It's a matter of all four of us getting on the same page, and you have to have people who sort of think the same thing. We all have this background of music, which we brought to the table when we were getting started. You sort of know these things – and if you've done a lot of listening to — as Gene did early on in his career, Robert Farnon — and those things which had those lush harmonies with a lot of unusual progressions. So you have these different things already in your head. You know you have to execute, I guess. And that, to a lot of singers, is very difficult. I've run into countless people though the years in studio work who are just lost when they have to sing an intricate sounding chord. And for us, we did it very quickly."

I said, "Speaking of Robert Farnon, was he presumably one of your inspirations?"

Gene said, "Oh yes. I was living alone in California, in Hollywood, a place where the London record companies were shipping to. It was near Sunset. We handled the LPs of the Farnon stuff, and so I took some of those home. I would listen to him all the time. There were so many things from which to choose, cherry things. I liked the secondary lines; they were always so good. There were a lot of group singers in Los Angeles at the time. We would get together and just listen to Farnon records. And then the boss, bless his heart, gave me time off to start off with the Hi Los and get our act together."

Bonnie said, "I never knew that."

I said, "Farnon would insert a chord from another key and just run through it real quickly. And then, there were the lines."

Len said, "I was thinking about *Sentimental Journey* that we recorded with him, and he did exactly that. He had this chord that went on, shattered into all of these wonderful things. That was his way of writing."

Gene said, "Hank Mancini, Andre Previn, they all had the highest regard for him. Nobody could figure out that woodwind sound. It's the bassoon in the back. He had flute, flute, clarinet, clarinet, bass clarinet, and bassoon in the back. And we saw it when we standing there recording with him in Chapel Studios in London, and I said, 'There it is. That's the color.' A bassoon tucked in, not so that you'd know it's a bassoon. It drove Mancini and them crazy. They couldn't figure it out. What was in there? It's like a spice."

"Another neat little trick he had," I said, "was to use very soft, under-recorded vibes doubling the lead string line."

Len Dresslar recalled one of the sessions with Farnon: "They were recording. Farnon is up there conducting and the first fiddle goes mmmmm Splat! Falls right over on his side. Farnon bent over him and said, "My God the man is pissed!" They all laughed at the memory. Len added: "They canceled the session."

I said, "Did Farnon tell you about the drummer Phil Seaman? A fine musician but a serious drinker. He was in a pit orchestra doing some musical and fell asleep. They reached one of his cues and somebody woke him. He came up and his mallet hit the underside of a cymbal. There was this huge crash in the middle of a ballad, and he stood up with dignity and said, 'Dinner is served.'"

Don said, "The music business is filled with these stories. You just can't believe them but they're true."

Len said, "I always wished I could be that cool, 'Dinner is served.'"

To prepare the group for their recording sessions, Bonnie said, "Gene used to make cassettes for us of every chord so we could hear it ring out and know what to expect."

Len said, "He played on his little Wurlitzer electric piano. That was his tour de force for years."

Gene said, "I wish I still had it. Actually, I think Roger Kellaway has it, great little piano."

I said, "I had that piano for a while. It originally belonged to Don Ellis, and I too wish I still had it. It had a distinctive, pretty sound."

Did Gene do a lot of rewriting when the group assembled in Villingen? "Not very much, because we didn't have that much time. We came on a Saturday night, had the grand cocktail party. Sunday was a day off. We just sort of met in the park — next to the Ketterer Hotel — and said, "How are you?" and all that stuff. I think that we started on Monday morning at 8 o'clock.

"I usually went right to the piano and tried to correct things, and just apologized profusely — but too late, you know? This group is so good at putting things together fast; there was no problem."

(Later, Bonnie told me, "Len's wife Nicki, a sweet, wonderful woman, came to Villingen with Len for most of the sessions. I have such warm memories of Nicki and Gene's wife, Helen, from those years. Don's wife, Joan, had four small daughters to attend to in Chicago, making her visits less frequent. While we toiled away in the studio, Nicki

and Helen were off exploring, often going antiquing with Marlies Brunner-Schwer, Hans Georg's wife, buying clocks and music boxes and having lunch in the quaintest of villages in the Schwarzwald and nearby Switzerland, all in a chauffeur-driven Mercedes. The guys and I were positively envious.

("Every night, we would all convene for dinner in the cozy Hotel Ketterer dining room and ask Helen and Nicki what they had been up to that day. It was always good and good for many laughs. Great food, a glass or two of local wine, and singing with that group. What could be better?")

How did they choose material to sing?

Len said, "That was Gene's bag."

Gene said, "That was me, generally speaking. I really resorted to standards. I couldn't see much in the new things. I wasn't keeping up with the times for this group sound. I just wasn't into it. And Hans sure didn't seem to care. He said, "Just do what you want to do." There were some originals of Oscar's and Roger's of course, and some others. Farnon had one there I believe, of his."

Len said: *"How Beautiful is Night*, I think it was."

Gene confirmed: "*How Beautiful Is Night*, right. We had the odd stuff that was there. And Clare wrote a couple of things. Generally speaking, I would go back to standards, just scavenge the standard book."

"You did some John Lennon and Paul McCartney stuff," Bonnie said. "It was very current then."

I said, "And then, there was the Cello Quintet album. The group consisted of Roger Kellaway, Chuck Domanico, bass, Edgar Lustgarten, cello, Joe Porcaro, drums, and Emil Richards, percussion."

Bonnie said, "And so much sound out of just those people."

Len added: "They were incredible, absolutely incredible."

Gene said, "I liked the idea of that sound. It was something different that we had never used. We used some big bands, and Roger brought a different life to it. We would pick different tunes to do, with him in mind. We did his *Stone Ground Seven*, which was difficult."

Don agreed: "Yeah, that was tricky."

The group recorded on that date one of the songs I wrote with Roger.

Gene said, "I remember him playing that song on a break. I said, 'Wait a minute. That is so beautiful. It would be great for Bonnie, and I can write a choral background to it.' I said, 'We will just record your track.' And, that was it. Roger plays Mozartian piano on it."

I said, "My God, that was twenty-five years ago. The session was at the A&M studio on La Brea in Hollywood. You are the only ones who ever sang it, and Roger and I were blown away."

Don asked, "What was the title of that song?"

"*Yours Truly Rosa*. Roger and I wrote it for a movie that was never released."

Len said, "That is a beautiful thing. That album, correct me if I am wrong, was picked by the Japan Jazz Society. You sent me the copy of the Japanese recording of it. What an honor that was — tremendous."

This was followed by the first of two albums with Rob McConnell.

"That big band, the Boss Brass," Bonnie said, "you could tell, played together often. They had a regular Monday night gig."

Len said, We had a friend who gave me an album and told me, 'You have to hear to this band. And listen to it I did, and I said, 'Holy Hannah.' I copied it and got it off to Gene."

Gene said, "It was the double one on Umbrella Records, the two-disc album."

It was recorded direct to disc, with no splicing. The band had to play each of the four sides straight through.

Len said,"Gene just flipped over the thing. He called Rob. After he talked to Rob and decided we were going to do it, Don said, 'You know what we should do? We should go up to Toronto to meet this guy.'"

Don said, "On Saturday night! Our wives had been out shopping in the afternoon. They came home. We said, 'Would you like to go out to dinner tonight? They said, 'Sure. Where are we going?' We said, 'Toronto.' We called American Airlines. We got on the plane, and Joan forgot her driver's license. They did not want to let her into Canada. They asked what was our purpose of the visit? We said we were going to hear Rob McConnell. They responded, 'Oh, that's okay then. You can go.' Only because of Len did Rob knew we were there. You went upstairs to the club, and Len being so tall, he could look in. The place was packed, closing night. Rob saw Len and came out, and took us in. He couldn't get us in front of the band until the last set. My wife's left leg was totally bruised: I kept hitting her like this from the band, I was so excited. And then we came home. The next day we were back to Chicago."

I asked them when and where they did the first album with Robert Farnon.

Don said, "It was 1974. Hans Georg would fly us to the scene in London where the orchestra was going to be so we could get used to the studio.

"This was Hans Georg," Bonnie said.

Gene said, "Bonnie would always do her Geisterstimme tracks." The German means *ghost* or *phantom tracks*. These were tracks that would be used as guides for the rest of the group, but not used in the final mix. Gene continued, "Because so many of my things were rubato, she would sing it the way she perceived it should be done. She was right on the mark, and it would come out just perfect. We would have a guide track when we came to the studio."

Bonnie said, "This wee little voice singing quietly."

Gene said, "Just Bonnie singing, with some background, and from there we would put voices in."

I asked, "Did working with so big an orchestra, and with Farnon, put any restrictions on what you could write harmonically? Because you knew what he was going to do in the orchestra?"

"Not at all. He is one of the great arrangers that can fit anything, and make it much better. He has such good leading voices. I like that sort of thing. I use the bass as the foundation. Once he comes in with his middle section, the shout, it's all together different. Then, he comes back down to where you are."

"There are arrangers," Don Shelton said, "and then there are arrangers.. I could write an arrangement. But do I have musical taste to blend what I would like to do with what the artist is really going to do? And be in the foreground, or the background, when it should be? That's called taste, and it doesn't happen with everyone.

Len said, "Wasn't there a nick name for Farnon?"

"The Governor," Don said.

Bonnie said, "What a wonderful guy," and to Gene, "He used to call you, 'You old trout.' I used to love that. We did another Farnon in Villingen, *Eventide*. The musicians came from where?"

Don said, "Munich and all around."

Bonnie continued, "It was singing to the track. When you listen to this you have to know that we had to tune up to. This ensemble didn't tune up to us, and the beautiful, wonderful player Eberhard Weber was on bass. And I was singing my Geisterstimmes. He would look over at me like 'I don't believe it.' And, I'll tell why — you tell why." She nodded to Len Dresslar.

"Well it was, first of all, because a guy had come in to tune the harpsichord. He tuned it to A, in European flavor, which is a half tone higher. Nobody realized that until we got in there and then the oboe had a hell of a time trying to get keyed up to that A."

Don said, "It was a mine field that Gene had to deal with in mixing."

I said, "Pitch has been creeping up in orchestras. For what? A century or more?"

Don said, "Right."

"And European pitch is higher than ours."

Don said, "Oh, yeah. We go A, 440. They are always 442, and maybe a few seconds higher than that.

I said, "And this is destructive to violins built in the Stradivarius period, because it puts on so much tension. They weren't built for that. They were probably built for a lot lower then A 440."

Len said, "I hadn't thought of that."

I said, "You have been asked many times why you couldn't record the background tracks, and sing the four voices in front, live, in concert. People have done things like that, all the way back to Les Paul and Mary Ford. But you wouldn't do it."

Gene said, "We were asked to do that in Japan for several major concerts. The producer said, 'We will pay for the rehearsal of the singers in Chicago.' But on behalf of the group, I said we would not want to do that. There are too many unknowns. We would just be standing up there."

Bonnie said, "Just at that time, Paul McCartney had used pre-recorded vocals at his live show."

I said, "Now that is commonplace."

Bonnie said, "Of course now, everyone has gone so far the other way. But we thought that the people who bought our records, and liked our sound, for us to stand up there with any kind of fake lip synching was just not us."

Gene said, "It just felt uncomfortable."

Don said, "They said to us, 'You've done it for Manhattan Transfer. But when you stop to think about Manhattan Transfer, there are just these four parts that are self contained. Ours are not that way. You can't pick out what four parts we are going to do. We talked to Murray Allen at Universal. We said, 'Murray, help us with this. How could we do it?' We couldn't figure it out. Are we going to sing the top two parts? Are we going to sing the bottom two parts? Are we one top part? One Don-and-Gene part — baritone and bass? What are we going to do on top of all this other, and have it all valid? And then, have it all mixed in?"

Bonnie said, "And if you wanted to do what Paul McCartney was doing and add in those other vocals while you were singing here, you are singing along with tracks. And there is the nightmare of things not working."

Don said, "It is more sophisticated now. Even the Carpenters were doing that. They had recorded tracks. They had somebody along who knew exactly when to press that button. But it was just different with us. It just didn't seem

like it was going to fly."

Some time later, Don told me: "We did do a few live TV shows in Germany and Vienna and Paris where we lip synched to our recorded stuff, one with Oscar Peterson in Berlin. They did multiple images of us to go with the multiple tracks we had done. Looked terrific on the screen. It could have made a really good special on PBS. We also did one at Louisiana Park outside Copenhagen, looking out on Malmo, Sweden. *My Ship* was shot on a fishing boat in the harbor, *Fool on the Hill* done with rain coming down with Bonnie inside looking out at Gene, Len, and myself wearing bright yellow slickers with hats to match. Guess you can tell how much I treasure our memories together, with music at the center of our personal lives, all interwoven in and around that."

The Singers Unlimited never got a Grammy award. Gene got one for vocal arranging.

Gene said, "We got nominations."

Bonnie said, "Bridesmaids."

Don Said: "The Chicago Board of Governors finally got us a special little plaque. I treasure that one. It's as close as we got."

Bonnie said, "I went to the Grammy Awards when we were nominated. It was a big deal and it was fun."

I said, "There are so *many* award ceremonies nowadays. There are the Tony's in New York; there is the Director's Guild; there is the Actor's Guild Awards, which are just recent. There are the Screen Actors Guild; there is Country Music Awards; People's Choice; MTV; Golden Globe; Academy itself — every time you turn around there is an award. It's the entertainment industry's interminable self-congratulation"

Don said, "And Mozart never got an award. Did you ever think about how much red carpeting is used? Come spring time, it's just one show after another."

Len said, "I think they have a scream section for each one of those awards, and the minute somebody does something, they just say 'Cue 'em' and you get screams and that sort of thing."

I said, "It's a wonder they don't use laugh tracks. I tend to get pessimistic about the way our history is being erased by the broadcasting industry and the recording industry. The economic conditions that gave rise to the big band era don't exist anywhere. It's all changed. Do you have any images of where you see popular music going?"

Don said, "Not in terms of what we have talked about today. The big bands, the vocal groups that we knew and love, the musicians I played with in the Les Brown band for ten years, now that Les is gone, there is a rapid decline. We have more cancellations now than we have gigs. And that's because, I was telling Gene the other day, you lose your audience. All those people that are out there . . ."

I said, "They get to be seventy or eighty."

Don said, "That's right. And you're losing those people. And when that happens, that is the end of that particular cycle."

Bonnie said, "TV is in everyone's homes and it has such an influence. There is no reference to the older music now. It's all geared to what sells. What is marketable is pop music, hip hop, whatever — alternative music. My children had to be taught by me. But ordinary American kids aren't hearing it on TV. I really believe that TV is the culprit, not radio because it is all programmed the same in each city with rock radio. I think that there is going to be a revolution with that, because kids are on the internet getting their music, and they aren't paying attention to the radio. When is Miles Davis on TV? Or even Pat Metheny?"

Don said: "There are bright spots. You can get very morose and really dark on this. There are a lot of good things going on out there. Maybe what we are talking about is the fact there just isn't a broad enough segment which embraces the things that we know and love. But if you go round to these wonderful music schools, starting with the University of Miami, Western Michigan in Kalamazoo, and all across the US, they have music schools like the University of North Texas that are turning out players, and now, singers — incredibly good. And they are all exposed to this wonderful music. They all love Gene Puerling and all the things that we have been a part of. So there is all of that movement going on, and as they go out into society, they either teach or become professional or whatever. That can help in a way. But is it enough? That is the question."

Gene said, "I still have in my mind doing one more project. In surround sound. But we would almost have to do that as a vanity thing — in hopes of selling it.

Bonnie said, "Are you serious? With us?"

I said, "Well, he isn't talking about anyone else."

Bonnie said, "Fantastic. Geez."

I said, "What is surround sound?"

Gene explained: "Well, it plays back through five or seven different speakers around the listener. It is really designed for DVD or movie sound channels."

Len said, "Does that mean I get my own channel?"

Bonnie said, "At last! Recognition!" And there was general laughter.

Gene said, "You are going to have to fight for it."

The career of The Singers Unlimited came to an end with the 1982 release of *Easy to Love*. Hans George Brunner Schwer gave different reasons for discontinuing the recordings. He said in liner notes to the boxed set of seven CDs that he and Gene Puerling feared they would go stale if they continued, but on at least one other occasion he said that the music business was changing and he could not see going forward. One of his friends told me that in recording jazz people, not only Oscar Peterson but also Duke Ellington, Clare Fischer, Dizzy Gillespie and many more, he had dispensed more money than was judicious.

Whatever the reason, any hope of restoring the collaboration ended when he was killed in a car crash.

So was Dick Marx. The respect and affection in which Dick was held remains undimmed. Don Shelton told me: "He was so great to all of us. He put all four of our daughters to work singing commercials with his son Richard. What an opportunity for them." Richard Marx is the very successful song writer and singer.

Dick left Chicago in 1987 to settle in Los Angeles, where he composed and orchestrated for film, often enhancing the scores of people far less talented than he. Don Shelton said: "I planned to have lunch with Dick in July of 1997. I had worked for him on a film. Alas, we got a call from his office about the accident in Vegas, on the way to Wisconsin. I was planning to visit him at the hospital in Las Vegas but when I called they told me he had been airlifted to Highland Park Hospital by his son Richard and his wife Ruth. So I never got to see him. Two of our daughters attended the memorial in Chicago. He was special in our lives."

Mine too. I did have lunch with him at about that time. It was in some restaurant in Westwood. Dick by now was in the Guinness Book of World Records: he and his production company had turned out 14,000 jingles. White-haired and white-bearded, he had all his old warmth, and he kept me helpless with laughter with tales of travails in the advertising jungle. I asked him to knock it off, save the stories for another lunch when I could have a tape recorder on the table and collect the stories into a *Jazzletter*. It was never to be.

I do remember one story he told me. He wrote the music for a commercial for Timex in which the drummer played a repeated figure on temple blocks to suggest a clock and the passage of time. When they finished what Dick thought was a good take, the advertising-agency guy said, "It's wrong!"

Dick said, "What's wrong with it?"

The guy said, "It's the drummer! He ticked when he should have tocked!"

The evening after we finished our taped oral history, Mark Masters, who had organized and supervised it, took us all — the men and their wives and Bonnie and her husband Tom Radke — to dinner at a pleasant Italian restaurant. I was struck by the atmosphere that surrounded the four singers. It was more than camaraderie, more than friendship. I thought: These people *love* each other.

At some point, I raised a wine glass and said, "Here's to Dick Marx."

Bonnie said, "And Audrey and Oscar."

Once or twice I noticed Len Dresslar's eyes growing misty. Following Gene's statement that he would like to do one more album, we were discussing possible repertoire.

Recently I asked Don Shelton if he thought Len knew he was terminally ill. Don replied: "Len knew he had some medical dealings but I certainly can't attest to his knowing of anything imminent, especially since he went out and purchased new audio equipment a few months after Claremont. He was elated, as he said in an email to all of us, about listening again to some old LPs he had not heard in ages as well as our TSU stuff. He was overjoyed and very positive."

But when I asked Gene Puerling if he thought Len knew during that last dinner, he said, in a very subdued voice, "Yes, I think so." And later, when I discussed it with Don, he said that on thinking it over, he too thought Len knew.

If he did, he knew that the one last album Gene was dreaming of was never going to be made.

He died six and a half months later, on October 16, 2005, at his home in Palm Springs, California. Newspapers and television broadcasters said that the voice of the Jolly Green Giant had been stilled, and almost nothing of his other accomplishments.

And with that great low voice gone, The Singers Unlimited can never again exist. In a sense it never did exist. In a way all the tracks, up to twenty-seven of them, were like Bonnie's ghost tracks. The group itself was a ghost: it was conjured magically into being by the talent of four extraordinarily gifted people and a brilliant, patient, rich record-company owner and engineer, there in the beauty of the Black Forest.

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air . . . .
We are such stuff as dreams are made on
And our little life is rounded with a sleep.

— Shakespeare, *The Tempest*