

## BERNICE PETKERE

1901 – 2000

### “Queen of Tin Pan Alley”

*“I never was pals with the other women composers, or even the male ones. I had a private life...only a couple of music executives ever got what I called ‘fresh’ with me, and I let them have it, smack in the face like you never saw.”*

This scrappy, let’s get down to business attitude surely characterizes composer and lyricist Bernice Petkere (pronounced Pet-Care). She began her show business career early, at age 5 on the Pantages Vaudeville Circuit. Paired up with an aunt, she held up her end of a duo called ‘Baby Dolls’. The early push to the stage seemed to suit her very well, as she stayed in show business much of her life.

Bernice studied voice at the Henshaw Conservatory of Music in Chicago, and then taught herself to play piano as a teenager. Self taught or no, she was good enough to secure work as a pianist in the music publishing firm of Waterson, Berlin and Snyder in New York.

She started writing songs when she was 19 years old, but it wasn’t until 1931 she published her first song, “**Starlight (Help Me Find the One I Love)**”, which Bing Crosby recorded.

After marrying Fred Berrens (music director at CBS), she worked steadily composing theme music for many radio shows. Teaming up with lyricist Joe Young, Bernice composed “**Lullaby of the Leaves**“ for the 1932 Broadway revue *Chamberlain Brown’s Scrap Book*. Although the show didn’t last more than a dozen performances, the tune was introduced on the radio by Freddie Berrens and his Orchestra, and there were soon records made by Ben Selvin and Connee Boswell. This intriguing composition has become a genuine jazz standard. Compositionally rich, with a wistful, slightly mournful melody, it was a favorite vehicle for Art Tatum, Dizzy Gillespie and continues to be played by jazz artists all around the globe.

Irving Berlin was so impressed by her work that he asked her to be a staff writer for his publishing company. Over the next few years she wrote many fine songs, including the music and lyrics to “**Close Your Eyes**” and the lovely “**By a Rippling Stream**”. With lyricists Joe Young and Ned Washington she penned “**Did You Mean What You Said Last Night?**”, “**The Lady I Love**”, “**Stay Out of My Dreams**”. She once received a

letter delivered by the Post Office with no other address than “Bernice Petkere, Queen of Tin Pan Alley”.

Moving to Los Angeles in the late 30’s gave her the opportunity to write film scores as well, and her song “**It’s All So New to Me**” was performed by Joan Crawford in *Ice Follies*. Later Bernice also collaborated on story and screenplay for the film *Sabotage Squad*.

The down-to-earth persona of Bernice Petkere was perhaps best revealed in an obituary from the Los Angeles Times. When her apartment was converted into a condo out of her price range, a fan and investor bought the unit and allowed her to stay as long as she lived. Upon thanking her benefactor, Ms. Petkere is said to have added: “I hope you won’t be offended if I live a long time”. She died at the age of 98.

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#### Sources:

*The Unsung Songwriters*, Warren W. Vache, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000

*IMBd MiniBiography* by mintunmusic

*Los Angeles Times*, Obituary, January 12, 2000

*Yours for a Song: Women of Tin Pan Alley*, (DVD). American Masters 1999.

*The American Popular Ballad of the Golden Era, 1924-1950*, Allen Forte, Princeton University Press, 1995

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#### Suggested Listening:

“**Lullaby of the Leaves**” - Art Tatum, Connee Boswell (1932, lovely vocal), Chet Atkins (Hi-Fi in Focus), The Ventures 1961 (a big hit for them, and fantastic; surf guitar meets jazz.)

“**Close Your Eyes**” - Kurt Elling (brilliant), Ella Fitzgerald, Queen Latifah (as Dana Owens)