

Peggy Lee

1920 – 2002

“Singer/Songwriter”

She had a voice that caressed each note, and the word ‘sultry’ is used in every article written about her. She approached rhythm in a relaxed, confident way that we learned in later years to term ‘soulful’. Like Sinatra, and Louis, her accomplishments as a musician were almost eclipsed by her famous persona.

Yet few people really are aware of how what a prolific and superb songwriter Peggy Lee was. Writing at first with her guitarist husband Dave Barbour, she later worked with collaborators as diverse as Victor Young, Harold Arlen, Duke Ellington, Quincy Jones, Cy Coleman, Johnny Mandel, Dave Grusin, Sonny Burke, Marion McPartland, Lalo Schiffrin and Michel Legrand. Ms. Lee produced hit after hit for vinyl, television, Broadway, Hollywood and even animated features.

Born Norma Egstrom in North Dakota, she lost her mother at age 4, then suffered at the hands of a physically abusive step mother. Breaking first into radio at age 14, she ran away to join a string of regional bands, until she was finally spotted by Benny Goodman to replace Helen Forrest in his big band. In 1943 her version of “**Why Don’t You Do Right**” made her one of the most popular young singers in the U.S.

But a budding romance with Benny Goodman’s guitarist Dave Barbour caused the bandleader to enforce his strict rule about no band romances, and Peggy made the decision to ‘retire’, and marry Barbour. One year later she signed with Capitol as a solo artist, and started collaborating with her husband, writing a string of songs that hit big. “**What More Can a Woman Do**” (1945) was picked up and recorded by a very young Sarah Vaughn, and also was an R & B single for Big Maybelle.

In 1946, her song “**I Don’t Know Enough About You**” became a major hit for Capitol, and “**It’s a Good Day**” was used as one of the opening numbers in the Susan Hayward film, *With a Song in My Heart*, about the life of singer Jane Froman. In 1948 she wrote “**Mañana**,” which topped the charts for nine weeks. On every one of her dozens of albums, she made sure to include a few original songs, anticipating the classification of singer-songwriter by at least 20 years.

She often started with a melody and lyric in mind, and then sought out a writing partner to help her finish the song. In this way she co-wrote “**I Love Being Here With You**” (with Bill Schluger) a venerable work horse of a song that is in every jazz singer’s repertoire, “**The Shining Sea**” (with Johnny Mandel), the haunting, bittersweet “**Don’t Smoke in Bed**” (with Willard Robison...Peggy took her name of the publishing credits to help Robison financially). Peggy also could make a song come alive with her singer’s

knowledge of what made a good lyric and a great phrase. In this way she contributed lyrics to “**Johnny Guitar**” (Victor Young), “**Then Was Then**” (with Cy Coleman) and of course, “**Bella Notte**”, “**Siamese Cat Song**” and “**He’s a Tramp**” (with Sonny Burke).

Peggy Lee claimed to fall in love with music as a teenager by listening to the big back beat of the Count Basie Band on the radio – and her strong rhythmic sensibility was evident in her singing, writing and choice of material throughout her career. She embraced so many different and emerging styles in music, delving into blues, Latin and later, rock and roll. This open attitude kept her current years after her contemporaries had fallen off the charts.

In 1958 her version of Little Willie John’s “**Fever**” became her most famous recording, with her two original verses breathing fresh life into the song. (‘Romeo & Juliet’, ‘Captain Smith & Pocahontas’)

She was paid \$1000 by Walt Disney to compose 6 songs (with collaborator Sonny Burke) for the animated feature *Lady and the Tramp*. She made an additional \$3500 to be the voice of four of the characters and sing in the film as well (She played ‘Darling’, was the voice of both Siamese cats, singing “**We Are Siamese If You Please**”, and also played the character Peg singing ‘**He’s a Tramp**’). Disney had brokered hundreds of these unfair deals with artists, and later successfully fought off quite a few royalty claims brought by many, winning them a grim “Don’t Mess with the Mouse” tag line. But when the film was released in video cassette form in the 1970’s, the estimated additional \$90 million in sales to Disney was too much for the determined Ms. Lee to leave alone, and after a 15 year court battle, she successfully sued them for a landmark \$3.8 million in back royalties.

A twelve time Grammy nominated artist (who lost out almost every time to Ella Fitzgerald), she received a Lifetime Achievement Award in 1995. Peggy was adored by a wide spectrum of music lover: jazz fans who loved every hip release off of “Mink Jazz” and pop fans who adored her version of Lieber and Stoller’s “**Is That All There Is?**”. She won an Academy Award for her role in *Pete Kelly’s Blues* in 1955, playing a hard drinking, world weary singer.

But it was Peggy Lee’s unflagging passion for songwriting, no matter the vehicle, that amassed her surprisingly large portfolio of music. With Duke Ellington she wrote “**I’m Gonna Go Fishin’**” for the movie *Anatomy of a Murder*. Then in 1961, with Harold Arlen, she wrote “**Happy with the Blues**” for a television special on Arlen’s music. (*Happy with the Blues* became the title of Arlen’s biography.) She later co-wrote songs for the Jane Fonda movie *Joy House* (1964), the Carl Reiner movie *The Russians Are Coming! The Russians Are Coming!* (1966), the Cary Grant movie *Walk, Don’t Run* (1966), the Alan Arkin movie *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1968), the Charles Bronson movie *Rider on the Rain* (1971), and *The Nickel Ride* (1974).

In 1983, when she was to appear in a musical on Broadway about her life, entitled simply *Peg*, Peggy herself would write the score adding 22 new songs to her canon. Sadly, illness kept her from performing this show.

Sexy, sultry Peggy Lee – generations of singer/songwriters owe you a big ‘thanks’ for paving the way.

Sources:

Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazzwomen, Linda Dahl, Pantheon Books, 1984

Fever: The Life and Music of Miss Peggy Lee, Peter Richmond, Henry Holt and Company, 2006

Miss Peggy Lee: An Autobiography, Peggy Lee, Bloomsbury Press (UK) 2002

www.peggylee.com (A superb website, filled with an enormous discography, photos and articles)

Songwriters Hall of Fame: www.songwritershalloffame.com 1999 inductee

Suggested Listening:

Most of Miss Peggy Lee’s songs have been rendered perfectly by the writer herself. For a list of her compositions and which LP’s host which songs, go to www.peggylee.com

However, a few other notable mentions:

“**Don’t Smoke in Bed**” – Nina Simone, Julie London and k.d.lang. (k..d. lang’s version is still a stand out in her live shows)

“**1 Love Being Here With You**” – Ernestine Anderson, Diana Krall

“**It’s a Good Day**” – Mavis Rivers, Judy Garland

“**The Shining Sea**” – Tony Bennett