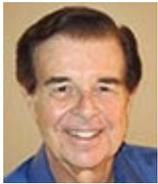


## ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



[This is the nineteenth article about legendary figures in the Jazz world, presenting little-known facts about those artists, about whom we thought we knew everything, or as time went on, had forgotten.]

### **PEGGY LEE**

The name "Norma Delores Egstrom" wouldn't sell, according to radio personality Ken Kennedy of WDAY in Fargo, ND during the 30s, so he devised the name, "Peggy Lee." But back on May 26, 1920, the star was born.

Norma was the seventh of eight children of a Swedish-American station agent for the Midland Continental Railroad and his Norwegian-American wife. Her mother died when Norma was just four years old. "Papa" later left home, leaving Peggy's care entrusted to a stepmother who physically abused her. Peggy later memorialized this in the calypso number "One Beating a Day." She did not have a happy childhood, and made her escape in music and song.

Norma first sang professionally over KOVC radio in Valley City, ND, at age 17 and then had her own show in Fargo. She left shortly after for the big times in LA. But this proved disappointing and she quickly returned to the North. At a gig in Chicago, Benny Goodman's fiancé was impressed by what she heard and recommended to Benny that he should consider her for the replacement of Helen Forrest (of *Green Eyes* fame), who had just left his band. So Goodman showed up the next night, liked what he heard, and the next day called her to offer her the job. But Peggy thought it was just a practical joke and didn't return Benny's call. But her friends insisted, and shortly after, Peggy joined the Goodman band in 1941 and got \$40 a week – which is what vocalists got with the name bands in those days.

Soon Peggy went down to the RCA Victor studios on 29th Street in New York City and recorded four tunes that day with the Goodman band. Peggy shot to almost instant stardom with the tune *Why Don't You Do Right?*, which sold over a million copies. She received \$25 for the extra work; no bonus, no special treatment. Dave Barbour, the guitarist in the band impressed Peggy with his sense of humor, observing that she got precisely \$6.25 for her first hit record. Eventually they fell in love and, contrary to Goodman's iron-fisted rule that no one fraternized with the girl singer, married. In 1943, Benny fired Dave, so Peggy quit too.

The idea was to drive to California, obtain movie studio work which paid pretty well, and have a child. She wouldn't have to sing again. She would write poetry. She would cook and play house and life would be wonderful. Daughter Nikki was

born in 1943, and for a few years, life was good. But two things happened; Dave convinced Peggy to cut a few sides with the newly formed Capitol Records in 1947, and he became foremost jazz arranger Bill May's drinking buddy. As her rising star shimmered, his drinking got worse.

She recorded more hits, like *I Don't Know Enough About You* (1946) and *It's a Good Day* (1947). With the release of the US No. 1-selling record of 1948, *Mañana* (which she co-wrote), her "retirement" was over.



In the late 40s and throughout the 50s, she sang with Perry Como, Jimmy Durante and Bing Crosby on their radio shows. Then came movies. She starred opposite Danny Thomas in the *Jazz Singer* in 1952. In 1956, she gave an Oscar-nominated performance as an alcoholic singer in *Pete Kelly's Blues* (1955). She also provided singing and speaking voices along with lyrics for Disney's *Lady and the Tramp* in the same year.

In 1956, Little Willie John recorded a song called *Fever*. 1958, Peggy recorded the first cover version of the song, for which she provided most of her own lyrics without credit (Romeo & Juliet, Captain Smith & Pocahontas). *Fever* was her biggest hit. Peggy was nominated for 12 Grammy awards, and won a Grammy for *Is That All There Is?* in 1969.

Lee's career spanned 60 years, producing some interesting trivia.

- She has a rose named after her. The "Peggy Lee" rose is pink with a touch of peach.
- Known professionally as "Miss Peggy Lee," she was Jim Henson's inspiration for the name of his muppet character, Miss Piggy, a sultry singer to be sure!
- For her *Fever*, it was Peggy's idea to eliminate her combo's guitar and have the musician provide the funky finger-snapping instead. The drummer, Shelly Manne, used his hands and fingers (no drumsticks) to tap his snare drum and tom-tom to the accompaniment of his bass drum.
- She sang the Lord's Prayer at the funeral of Louis Armstrong.
- A bartender at a famed Texas nightclub mixed up a new drink especially for Peggy. He named it for the Spanish version of "Margaret" which is the formal version of "Peggy". It became the Margarita!

Her 1989 album, "Peggy Sings the Blues", was a Grammy Award nominee. It's one of my favorites and the 2002 reissued audio CD can be found on Amazon (ASIN: B000SJIQ7M, Amerco / Musical Heritage Society label)

After years of poor health, Lee died of complications from diabetes and a heart attack at age 81. On her grave marker is the inscription "Music is my life's breath." It most certainly was.

*Tom and his wife Cheryl perform locally as "Just Me 2", a live music duo specializing in songs from the Great American Songbook. They can be reached at (772) 532-5054 or at [www.JustMeLiveMusic.com](http://www.JustMeLiveMusic.com).*