

Peter Allen

An Anacronistic Art

by Glenn A. Baker

It never reached the stage of blackface but there was always the possibility. With a career not so much in evolution as devolution, his Al Jolson period was never too far away. Peter Allen confirmed the tag before it passed his lips. "That's right. I'm an absolute anachronism," he boasted. "That's why I do so well. I probably would have been a really huge star in the '30s and '40s."

Never mind that, Allen was a huge star in the '80s, a lone vaudevillian song 'n' dance man fired by the spirit of Fats Waller, Fred Astaire, Carmen Miranda and Little Richard. A renaissance minstrel man who, when forced to extend his sold-out season at New York's Radio City Music Hall in 1982, was described by one Gotham critic as "returning in triumph to the Music Hall like Julius Caesar to Rome."

Allen loved reviews like that. They fueled the gigantic private joke he had been enjoying at the expense of his audiences for 30 years. "I just think to myself that people have actually paid money to come and see me do this, which is crazy," he said in 1988. "The only thing I've got is a lot of energy and tenacity and maybe a little songwriting talent, and somehow I've forged it into this 'thing' that people will actually pay me hundreds of thousands of dollars for! It's so nuts."

"For a long time I was this serious songwriter but then came Radio City and the Rockettes and I just developed this whole other side. Which was fun because I'd been doing all these old songs and Al Jolson and Fats Waller impersonations since I was a kid. But now I get to have 50 showgirls come over the top. I can do what I used to dream about."

Born Peter Allen Woolnough on February 10, 1944, in Tenterfield, Australia, Allen was the son of a violent heavy drinker. Growing up in an outback Australian town, Allen's dreams were more grandiose than most. "I think I must have had a full fantasy life. That's probably why I got into music. I was lucky to be real talented very early on. As soon as I found a piano I could play it. I had a great ear and it was easy for me to go off into any area; I could just play anything. Actually, I thought I was a pretty normal kid, even though I did play piano in pubs and tapdance! There's one of those in every town, I guess."

But not all of them end up on Broadway. Not all of them want to. Antipodean dreams know their limits. All Allen ever wanted to do was to get to Sydney, Australia's biggest city; anything else was a bonus. After all, Broadway was just a big street in Sydney which housed the largest breweries. "I thought I'd be in Australia forever," he insisted. "I was amazed when the Allen

Brothers got booked into Hong Kong and Japan."

Peter Allen was no less an anachronism in the early '60s than he was in the late '80s. "I was in another world then. I missed the whole '60s thing. I'm younger than the Beatles but it was like I was 10-15 years older at the time. I heard 'She Loves You' about the same time as I was listening to June Christy's lyrics and I thought that 'yeah yeah yeah' stuff was the dumbest thing I'd ever heard! I didn't see anything in the Beatles at all, then. I was on top of the Hong Kong Hilton with Judy Garland having a wonderful time."

With Judy Garland as his manager, mentor and mother-in-law, Allen moved even closer to the traditional world of glittering "showbiz" and even further from the revolutionary contemporary music of the '60s. While he readily admitted that he certainly didn't encounter the great lady at her peak and that the image had far less substance than the often tragic reality, he did concede. "I learned a lot from her by osmosis. There were lots of times when we'd just sit at a piano and sing all night, just the two of us. She just adored music and I could play her anything she wanted. Judy was the only person I ever met who knew as many songs as I did—old songs, obscure songs, anything."

"Her humor, her ability was incredible, and Liza [Minnelli, Garland's daughter] had a lot of the same thing. It was more interesting to watch Liza move a stool across stage than it was to watch other people's entire act. She just looked as if she belonged on a stage. I used to think, 'If I could ever get that.' But it takes a long time. Liza had it naturally but I didn't. I had to work for mine."

And work he did, relentlessly, for almost two full decades on a bold arc which effectively began on Broadway and eventually took him back there, though, regrettably, not to the success he was expecting. Actually, season may be a little too grand a description of his first Broadway stint. *Soor* opened at the Ritz Theatre just before Christmas 1970 and closed within a week. "It was everybody's first show," he defended. "It was supposed to be another *Hair*. It was terrible, but the cast! It was about this acoustic rock group that's forced to go electric and I played the agent who convinced them. There was Barry Bostwick, Joe Butler from the *Lovin' Spoonful* and Vicki Sue Robinson, who became a disco star. The young lovers, if you can believe it, were Richard Gere and Nell Carter!"

Still, it was a step up from his previous stage assignment, writing the Candy Darling songs "Butt Blues" and "Don't Turn Around When Your Lover Has A Needle In His Arm" for *Vain Victory*, a piece of Jackie Curtis underground theater at La Mama.

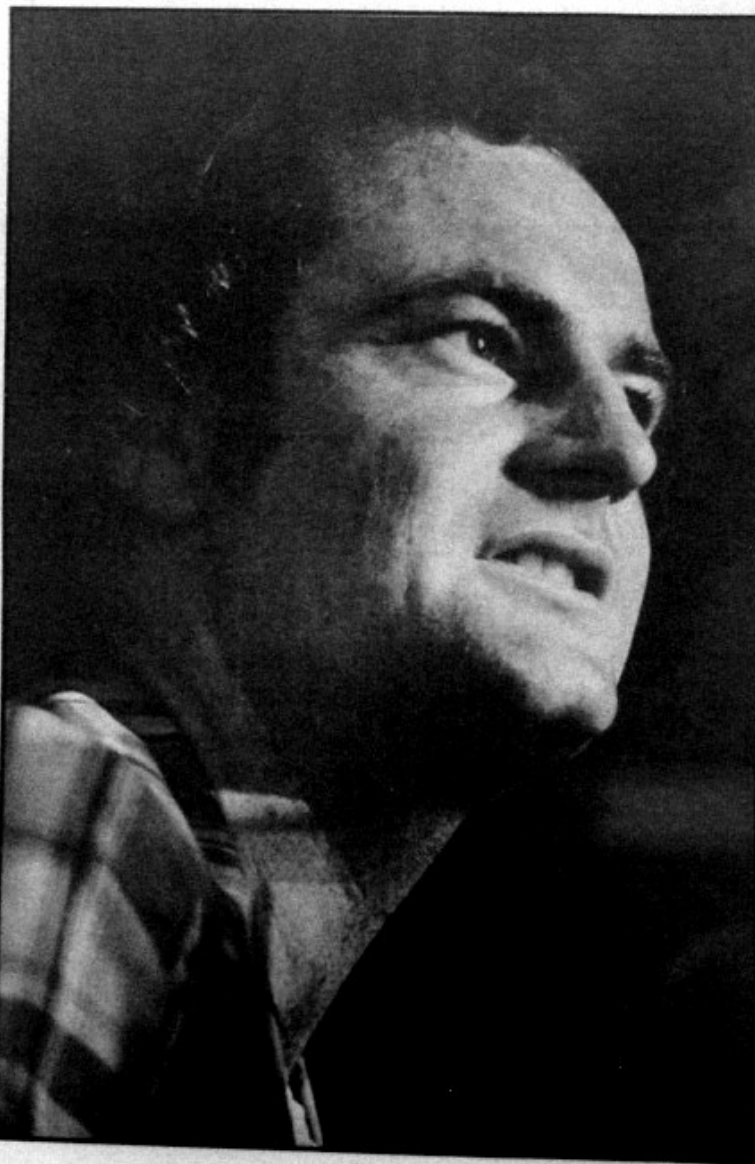
The underwhelming response to these early theater projects soured Allen on the Great White Way and sent him off on a pop chart tangent. The age of the cosmic, introspective singer-songwriter had dawned and the boy from the Aussie bush sensed a viable direction in highly personal songwriting. "It was the era when you could write anything you wanted and be all rambling and obscure," he recalled. "I thought that singer/songwriters like Randy Newman, Harry Nilsson, Joni Mitchell and Laura Nyro were just brilliant."

Allen's catharsis, triggered by the breakdown of his marriage to Liza Minnelli, embraced his music, his sexuality, his very identity. "I had been using Liza and my partner Chris as crutches and my life had been

very comfortable," he reasoned. "I was this nice guy who sang in Playboy Clubs. The Allen Brothers had only ever been an act, a way to get around the world. I never felt emotionally about anything we sang. So the day I split up with Liza I rang Chris and said, 'That's it, I'm not going to do the act anymore, we're grinding to a halt anyway,' and that night I became a songwriter. An explosion happened and I couldn't get to the piano and write things down fast enough. It just came out, song after song after song."

"I stopped thinking of myself as a secondary talent. God knows, I couldn't compete with Liza, so I took another way. I went to live in Greenwich Village with one pair of jeans. I'd never been on my own in my life, never able to function for myself. Either

Peter Allen



Chris's father had been making all the arrangements, or Liza or Judy Garland. It suddenly went very wild. It was the early '70s in New York, a time when you just went home with anyone, and everyone. You just naturally assumed that no matter who anyone was, they'd sleep with you. It was incredible."

It was not Allen's own series of stark, wry albums on Metromedia, A&M and Arista which established him as a major talent, but certain of the songs contained therein. Rendered by other performers, as diverse as Neil Sedaka, Patti LaBelle, Frank Sinatra, Ann-Margret, Bobby Vinton, Melanie, Melissa Manchester, Christopher Cross and Olivia Newton-John, they reached and touched a mass market; often to the considerable astonishment of the writer. "I Honestly Love You" has been recorded almost 40 times and when I got the first check for it I almost fainted. I must have strange tastes because I had no idea that it was a great song.

"When Olivia told me she was going to put it out as a single I begged her not to. I said, 'Don't be crazy, it will be the end of your career. It doesn't even have a drum on it.' Then I went away to spend the summer in the woods or something and I came back and asked a friend, 'What ever happened to poor Olivia's single?' and he said 'Are you nuts? It's number one, the biggest record she's ever had.' So I called my mother in Sydney and yelled, 'I've got the number one record in America!' and all she said was, 'You're kidding.' She's like that."

Marion Woolnough remained Peter Allen's link to home. She held his Oscar for *Arthur's Theme* on her mantel and his interests close to her heart. "She comes to New York sometimes, takes me aside and says, 'Now I know I'm just a nobody from Australia, Peter, but watch out for that one, and I wouldn't trust him too far, and be careful of her.' The funny thing is, she's usually right."

It was during a visit home to mom and his Bondi Beach apartment that the kernel of Allen's last Broadway musical, the ill-fated *Legs Diamond*, was formed.

"About three years ago everybody was going, 'Broadway musical, Broadway musical,' so I thought about it and eventually got the idea form this terrible movie about Legs Diamond, the Chicago gangster, which I

loved as a kid. So I locked myself away for months and hammered out these songs which everyone seemed to love. Enough to give us \$5 million to do the show anyway. Since then it's just got huge. There's 20 new songs and 35 people, lots of showgirls and dancers. It's like an old-time musical, there's no socially redeeming factors at all! But the score's good as there's nothing on Broadway like this. There's certainly nothing on there that I like at the moment."

The metamorphosis from dogged album artist and professional hit-writer to "a master craftsman" offering "the kind of glittering razzle dazzle that is a rarity on the New York stage" (*N. Y. Times*) was not entirely an organic process. It came about as a consequence of a conscious career decision. "I've never been a big record seller and there didn't seem to be much point to staying in there and keeping up the fight," he explained. "These days, frankly, a white singer of a certain age is very hard to sell. Tina Turner can go on forever and Lionel Richie still sells millions of records, while Barry Manilow and Kenny Rogers can't get a hit anymore. But with Broadway, there's all this money out there and people who are desperate for good shows."

"So I've become a 'performer.' Over the past couple of years I've worked so much that I've taken off as this major entertainer. Before that I was a songwriter who sang occasionally, and I think I've come to like this stage best. I can't act at all but I think I pull it off with sheer force of personality. I'm out there having fun and if people like it, that's great, but I don't see myself changing their lives. I think it's a bit pretentious to think along those lines."

Allen succeeded in changing the lives of the revered Radio City Music Hall Rockettes, who were never quite the same after they encountered him. "Until I worked with the Rockettes they'd never done an impromptu encore, but I just dragged 'em back on. Before I got to those girls they were frozen icons, a bit like the Empire State Building. I levelled them a bit, brought them down from their tower so they could have some fun. That's what led me into this whole entertainment thing. It's just the most incredible thing to be on stage with the Rockettes. For some reason, pretty girls kicking up their legs in unison evokes such



L-R: Bill Graham, Dee Anthony (manager of), Peter Frampton and Peter Allen in 1977

excitement. You can hear the audience gasp when they think it's going to happen.

"Now I can't stop myself. I did high kicks on ice at Rockefeller Center last year with all these great skaters and the audience going, 'Ooh ooh ooh.' And I was wearing regular shoes! I have great coordination. I've never hurt myself on stage, no matter how outrageous I get. I'm more likely to fall over in the street on the way to the limo after the show."

Little Richard, Allen's first musical hero, can take part of the credit for this high kick alacrity. "When I started performing in pubs as a young teenager I used to try to put my foot on top of the piano like he did. But he had a grand piano and I had to use big old grandma's uprights, which were a couple of feet higher. On top of that, I had these bloody heavy cricket shoes, which were as close to white bucks as I could find. I'd kick my leg up on top of the upright and these things would fly off into the audience. It was a very strange act."

The essence of which survived. Once dubbed a "naughty panssexual gigolo" and, variously, a cross between Errol Flynn and Carmen Miranda and Jerry Lee Lewis and Noel Coward, Peter Allen drew from a thousand classic influences to create his very own genre. And in doing so he not so much climaxed as began his showbiz persona. At least that's what George Burns thought. "I have George come to see me all the time," Allen revealed. "He keeps telling me that he wants to put together a new act called Burns and Allen."

"After one great show with the Rockettes he said to me, 'Well, what do you think, Pete, think you'll stay in it or not?' As if I'd just tried it out for a while. But then, compared to his 80 years, that's probably all I have done. I told him that I thought I'd stick around."

Sadly, Peter Allen didn't. He was diagnosed as having throat cancer during a visit to Australia late in 1992 and immediately returned to his home in the United States, where he quietly passed away some months later, exemplifying the lyrics of his song "Don't Cry Out Loud" (a 1979 international hit for Melissa Manchester). [Ed. note: Most news reports cited AIDS as the cause of Allen's

death.]

His death was mourned more deeply in Australia, where he was seen in a quite different light than in America. The Radio City Music Hall Peter Allen didn't mean a great deal down under. In his homeland he was an acclaimed songwriter and occasional hit artist ("I Go To Rio" was number one in 1977 and his remake of "The More I See You" was Top 10 in the same year), who waved the flag with a sentimental song that has become a theme for all expatriates, "I Still Call Australia Home," and captured the essence of growing up in the Australian bush with the magnificent "Tenterfield Saddler." His homosexuality, which he spoofed on his 1980 A&M album *Bi-Coastal* and later with the Arista track "Not The Boy Next Door," was never really an issue in Allen's home country.

Allen left behind a rich and diverse catalog of songs which will be recorded widely for many years. Not only those mentioned earlier but "Don't Wish Too Hard," "I'd Rather Leave While I'm In Love," "Fly Away," "Everything Old Is New Again," "She Loves To Hear The Music," "You And Me (We Wanted It All)," and the haunting Judy Garland tribute, "Quiet Please, There's A Lady On Stage," all of which were written with Carole Bayer-Sager.

Allen's albums are mostly deleted, although Australia still has an excellent 18-track *Very Best Of A&M* collection available. However, they are worth seeking out, particularly 1975's Brooks Arthur-produced *Taught By Experts*, which featured guest performances by Dusty Springfield, Lesley Gore, Brenda Russell and Herb Pederson. (At that stage of his career he was in the same management stable as Peter Frampton.)

"Once before I go, I want you to know that I would do it all again," Allen wrote and sang in 1983, although he did add the regret that, "It's hard to say good-bye when there's so much that's left unspoken." Perhaps so, but what was spoken by the man was often moving and always entertaining.

1990



©Linda Matlow/PIX INT'L

Peter Allen Discography

The Peter Allen discography that follows was inadvertently omitted from the article on the

late Australian singer that ran in our last issue. It was compiled by Glenn A. Baker, the author of the piece.

Singles

As The Allen Brothers

title	label	record	year
Leadon		Bells Bells Bells/Summer Clouds*	1960
Pye	PP054	First Kiss/My Secret*	1960
Pye	PP065	Pretty Keen Teen/There's No Need*	1960
Pye	PP067	Ever Since/Too Much*	1960
Pye	PP092	No Hesitations/Knockin' On The Right Front Door*	1961
HMV	4434	Be An Angel Darling/No Fooling*	1961
HMV	4457	Baby Loves Me/Firefly*	1962
HMV	4471	Ain't Misbehavin'/There's Never Been A Girl Like You*	1962
Mercury	72776	Just Friends/Ten Below	1968
Mercury	72820	A Baby's Coming/A Man And A Woman	1968

As Peter Allen

M' media	224	Honest Queen/	1970
M' media	256	Just Ask Me/I've Been There	?
M' media	68-001	Tenterfield Saddler/More Than I Like You	1972
A&M	1655	I Honestly Love You/Just Ask Me I've Been There	?
A&M	1670	Continental American/Pretty Pretty	1974
A&M	1722	She Loves To Hear The Music/Shy As a Violet	?
A&M	1813	The More I See You/This Time Around	1976
A&M	1873	I Go To Rio/This Time Around	1977
A&M	2000	Don't Cry Out Loud/Audience	1978
A&M	2125	I Could Have Been A Sailor/We've Come To An Understanding	1979
A&M	2145	Don't Wish Too Hard/If You Were Wondering	?
A&M		Tenterfield Saddler/I Could Have Been A Sailor*	?
A&M	K7843	I Still Call Australia Home/same (inst)*	1980
A&M	2272	Bi-Coastal/Simon	1980
A&M	2288	Fly Away/Planes	1981
A&M	2303	I Could Really Show You Around/One Step Over Borderline	1981
Arista	1041	Not The Boy Next Door/You Haven't Heard...	1983
Arista	9044	Just Another Make Out Song/Fade To Black	?
Arista	9082	Once Before I Go/Fade To Black	?
Arista	9161	You And Me (We Wanted It All)/You'll Always Get Your Way	?

Albums

Mercury	SR61166	Chris & Peter Allen's Album #1	1968
Metromedia	1042	Peter Allen	1970
Metromedia	2769	Tenterfield Saddler	1972
A&M	SP3643	Continental American	1974
A&M	SP4584	Taught By Experts	1977
A&M	SP3706	It Is Time For Peter Allen	1977
A&M	SP4739	I Could Have Been A Sailor	1979
A&M	4825	Bi-Coastal	1980
Arista	9613	Not The Boy Next Door	1983
Arista	12-8275	Captured Live At Carnegie Hall	1985

* = Australia only release