



Peggy Lee's Search for Success

The thrilling intensity of her singing style mirrors a great talent, a troubled life—and a faith that has helped sustain her

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BEFORE EVERY performance, Peggy Lee closes her eyes and recites a special prayer.

Because these silent moments mean so much to her, she is reluctant to talk about them. The only thing she ever has revealed came out during this FAMILY WEEKLY interview, when she explained:

"I stand there and say, 'Father, I am in Your presence. I know I cannot leave Your presence.' Then I feel safe, and I can give freely of myself. I try to reach out with my songs to touch the people who are listening."

Peggy has been trying to understand how to feel this safety of God's presence for a long time. Born Norma Jean Egstrom in Jamestown, N. Dak., she was only five when her mother died. The children in the family were scattered among relatives and friends to grow up. "I was lonely and missed my mother terribly," Peggy says.

AS THE YEARS passed, the anxious and fear-haunted girl somehow got the idea she would like to be a professional singer. One day she bragged rashly to some of her school chums that she was "going out to Hollywood to sing."

"I never thought anybody would take me seriously," Peggy says. "But after they gave me a farewell party, I had no choice."

With \$18 and one battered suitcase, she set off to conquer Hollywood—only to find that one can easily be lonely and jobless in the movie capital. Soon she was forced to return meekly to Jamestown.

Although she never expected it, it was North Dakota, not Hollywood, that gave Peggy her first real chance. The manager of a Fargo radio station liked her voice and gave her a job. He didn't like her name, however, and changed it to Peggy Lee.

Singing dates on other stations and in small hotels followed. It was a tough grind, but in the process the distinctive ballad style of Peggy Lee was developing. Finally, Benny Goodman, a musician with a reputation as a tough perfectionist, heard her and offered her a job. During the two years Peggy toured with his band, he shaped and sharpened her jazz style.

But despite Peggy's growing success, the loneliness and fears of her childhood still haunted her. "I was always extremely nervous and frightened when I sang," Peggy recalls.

The critical moment came in 1943, when she had her first chance to sing

on network radio. As air time neared, she sat shivering in her New York hotel suite, her throat so choked and raw she could hardly talk.

Suddenly the distraught singer remembered a lecture she had heard just before leaving Los Angeles. A minister, Dr. Ernest Holmes, had spoken about the healing power of prayer. She phoned him and poured out her desperation to him. Dr. Holmes listened quietly, then answered: "Don't worry, Peggy. I'll pray for you. The power of God, through prayer, is available to everyone."

"Within two hours I was out of bed and the soreness seemed almost gone," Peggy says. "By show time, no one even knew I was sick."

After that, she consulted Dr. Holmes often, and his counsel strengthened her. In the years that followed, she was able to establish herself as one of the most successful vocalists in the country. Her recordings of "Mañana," "Why Don't You Do Right," "Lover," and "Fever" sold millions, and her current hit, "I'm a Woman," is well on its way to the top. In addition, she has become a successful lyricist, writing such songs as "It's a Good Day" and "Golden Earrings," and her dramatic performance in the movie, "Pete Kelly's Blues," won her an Oscar nomination.

Unfortunately, Peggy's singing success has not been matched by success in marriage.

WHILE WITH Benny Goodman, she fell in love with Dave Barbour, a composer-guitarist with the band. After they were married, they quit traveling and settled down in California, where together they wrote some of Peggy's best songs.

"I tried very hard to keep the love and closeness Dave and I had found," Peggy says. "I wanted our daughter Nikki to have a home with a mother and father, a blessing that I had never had. I was willing to give up my career for it."

But despite the affection that existed—and still exists—between Peggy and Dave, the marriage broke up in 1948. After that came brief marriages to actors Brad Dexter and Dewey Martin.

Peggy's troubled life—and the growing faith that helps to sustain her—seem to give a special intensity to her singing. It gets through to listeners, and they flock to hear her. As jazz critic Leonard Feather said, "If you don't feel a thrill when Peggy Lee sings, you're dead."