



549

700
Sundays

BILLY
CRYSTAL



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EPILOGUE

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Creating and performing *700 Sundays* on Broadway was the most fulfilling time in my career. Many people helped make that journey the joy it was, and in many ways also made this book possible. So, to Des McAnuff, who directed the play, and to my collaborator and friend Alan Zweibel for his work, some of which graces these pages. I thank you.

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To all my relatives, some long gone, I'm so grateful for your love and laughter. To Jenny, Michael, Ella, and Lindsay for their devotion, and to my brothers Joel and Rip, who were always up there with me. And to Janice: Did you ever think when we first met, that some day we would be on stage together at Radio Music Hall, Tony awards in our hands, standing in front of our kids? "Can you dig that? I knew that you could."

—bc

“Consider the rose . . . The rose is the sweetest smelling flower of all, and it’s the most beautiful because it’s the most simple, right? But sometimes, you got to clip the rose. You got to cut the rose back, so something sweeter smelling and stronger, and even more beautiful, will grow in its place.”

—Zutty Singleton



1957: We got a new car

CHAPTER

We got a new car! I was the most excited kid in the world because we finally got a new car, and I didn't even know what make it was. All my father said on the phone was, "I just bought a new car, and it's a surprise, so, everybody be out in front of the house because I'm going to pull up exactly at noon." So right before noon, we stood in the driveway, my brothers, my mom and I, trying to guess what Dad bought.

"Maybe it's the Ford Fairlane," Joel, who was fifteen, wondered.

"No, I bet it's the Bonneville," Rip, eleven, said with authority.

"He mentioned something about the Chrysler Imperial," said Mom.

I interrupted, which I always did because I was the youngest and the shortest, which made me the loudest. I was also nine. "Wait, he said it was a surprise! What if he got," as I looked up to the sky with hope, "a *Cadillac*?" (I swear I could hear angels singing.)

We were silent for a brief moment, all of us considering that heavenly possibility, when we heard Pop's honk, and there he was waving, as he pulled up in our brand-new, right-out-of-the-showroom, 1957 . . . gray-on-gray Plymouth Belvedere.

What the hell was he thinking? Of all the cool cars out there, he picks *this* one? A Plymouth? And gray? Gray isn't even its own color, it's a combination of black and white. And two tones of it?

This was not the car of my dreams, but at least it was a new car with big fins, red leather interior and push-button transmission. The Plymouth replaced the only car I ever knew in my life and I was glad to see this car go. It was an embarrassing-to-drive-around-Long-Beach-in big, black, boxy, 1948

Chevrolet. This was an ugly automobile. It had a sun visor over the front windshield, so it looked like the car was wearing a fedora. Sometimes it looked like the car was an old-time film noir detective sitting in front of our house. It wasn't a family car. This was a getaway car. They killed Sonny on the Causeway in this car. Why on earth would he keep this car for nine years?

Two reasons. One, we couldn't afford anything else; and two, my father loved this car. He took perfect care of this car. He even named the car. He named the car "Nellie." Men always name their cars after women, and talk about them like they are women. It's always, "She's a beauty, isn't she?" It's never, "Isn't Ira a great-looking car?" Boats are almost always named after wives, daughters, or girlfriends. I have never seen the SS *Larry*. Even the man who dropped the bomb on Hiroshima named the plane after his mother, *Enola Gay*:

"Hi Mom, I just dropped the A-bomb on Japan and killed eighty thousand people, and I named the plane after you!"

"Oh son, thank you, I can't wait to call Ida, she's always bragging about her Sidney."

And men talk to their cars, just like they're women—"Come on girl, turn over baby, turn over." Men treat their cars like women: put a lot of miles on them, and eventually they trade them in for newer models.

Toward the end of Nellie's life with us, she suffered from post-ignition syndrome or PIS, as Emily Dickinson called it. That meant you would turn off the ignition, and poor Nellie would sputter and spew for a few minutes afterward. It sounded like Nellie was an old woman getting in the last words of an argument:

"No, it's you. It's you. Not me. It's you. It's you. It's you. Not me. It's you. Not me. Not me. It's you. It's you. Not me. It's you. It's you. It's you. Not me. It's you. Not me. Not me. It's you. Not me. Not me. Fuck you!"

So finally we have the new car, with its intoxicating "new car smell," which smells exactly like . . . a new car. We took it out for a ride to celebrate at our favorite Chinese restaurant in Long Beach—because it was the *only* Chinese restaurant in Long Beach—a place on Park Avenue that we loved, a place called Wing Loo.

We were sitting in the front booth, the picture window behind us, and my dad was in a giddy mood. He had a couple of vodka gimlets, which is vodka, with just a splash of gimlet in it. And every time Mr. Loo would go by, Dad would giggle and say, "What's new, Loo?" And the gray-on-gray Plymouth Belvedere was outside, gleaming under the streetlight, as best a gray-on-gray Plymouth Belvedere can. We were having the time of our lives. In other words, a perfect time for something to go wrong.

Big John Ormento was one of the local Mafiosos in Long Beach. There were a number of reputed gangsters living there. In fact in the book of *The Godfather*, Vito Corleone and family lived in Long Beach. Big John was scary, our Luca Brasi. While we were eating our egg rolls, and drinking our drinks with the little umbrellas in them, we had no idea that Big John Ormento was drunk driving *his* new car, a 1957, anti-Semitic Lincoln Continental. And he came roaring up Park Avenue, swerved and slammed into the back of the Belvedere, which then slammed into the back of the car in front of it, reducing our new car to a 1957 gray-on-gray Plymouth Belv! The crash was tremendous. We turned around so fast lo mein flew out of our mouths hitting and sticking to the window.

Big John staggered out of his car, surveyed the damage, shook his head a few times and started to

laugh.

“Oh my God, it’s Big John,” Mom gasped.

“I’m going out there,” said Dad as he started to push his way out of the black leather booth.

“Don’t, Jack, what if he has a gun?” Dad ordered another gimlet.

Ormento ran to his car and took off.

Ten minutes later, Officer Miller was questioning my father. “Did you see who did this, Mr. Crystal?”

Dad never hesitated. “No, we heard the crash, and by the time we got out here, they were gone.”

Mom looked at Dad, confused a bit, but knowing he probably did the right thing. Joel and Rip and I were dying to tell, but “dying” being the operative word here, we said nothing.

“Some people,” the cop muttered. “Must have been some kid going too fast.”

“Yeah,” said Pop. “These kids today . . .”

It was a Sunday night, and Dad’s service station, “Stan’s,” was closing early. Stan told Dad he didn’t have any room for the car in the shop, but he would tow it to our house and pick it up in the morning.

The twisted piece of metal sat in front of our house, at 549 East Park in Long Beach, Long Island. A sleepy beach town of approximately ten thousand people, which nodded off in the winter and woke up in July to three times as many enjoying a beautiful summer at the sea, Long Beach was surrounded by water. The bay (Reynold’s Channel) on one side of town, with its beautiful wetlands; and the Atlantic Ocean on the other, its thunderous waves hitting the shore of beautiful white sand beaches. The boardwalk stretched the length of the town and featured some amusement park rides. There were games of chance, and a batting cage, a soft ice cream shop, a knish place (Izzy’s) and a large municipal swimming pool. Modest homes, and the occasional thirties mansion, dotted the tree-lined streets. A few hotels near the boardwalk were once filled with people, making Long Beach at one time a sort of Atlantic City without the saltwater taffy and the diving horse. The abandoned submarine watch tower, left standing since World War II, was the place to take your girl for a kiss, or smoke a cigarette for the first time. At one time there was horseback riding on the beach, and supposedly George M. Cohan wrote “Only 45 Minutes from Broadway” about Long Beach.

It was known as America’s healthiest city, which is why my sickly grandparents moved there from the Bronx and bought homes for my Uncle Danny and us, in 1951. It was a wonderful place to live. However, at nine o’clock that Monday morning, Long Beach didn’t feel like the safest place to be.

Stunned, the five of us sat in the living room bemoaning the loss of the Belvedere. The doorbell rang and I got it. I always got the door because I thought someday somebody’s going to be there who would take me to Hollywood.

When I opened the door, there was an overcoat, a neck and an eyebrow. Big John Ormento was in the doorway. He looked down at me, which wasn’t difficult. I was surprised to see his face.

Usually gangsters like this are on television, sitting in silhouette confessing to their gruesome crimes, their voices electronically altered, sounding like Darth Vader on Quaaludes. Big John’s voice was deep—it actually seemed to echo—and he had an accent as thick as his police file.

“Can I see your father, please?”

My heart was beating so loud, I thought he could hear it. My throat was dry, making it a full octave higher than it already was.

“I will go and see if there is one here.” And I ran into the living room, faster than a hyperactive midget wrestler.

“Dad, Big John Ormento’s here. Big John Ormento’s outside. He’s going to kill us. He’s going to kill all of us! We’re doomed!”

“Billy, calm down. Calm down. He’s not here to hurt us. He probably just wants to talk to me. Let him in.”

“Me? I’m nine! I’ve got everything to live for!” (I became a better actor later.) “Please.”

“Let him in.”

I went back to the door to get Big John; he seemed even bigger, his head was so large it caused a total eclipse of the sun.

“Come on in.” He followed me into the living room. He stood there, looking menacing, and uncomfortable. He stared at my dad, took off his hat, and then he spoke.

“Hey, how fast do think your car was going when it backed into my car?”

We all froze. Big John broke out in a Pavarotti kind of laugh. “I’m just kidding. How you doing? I’m John Ormento. Nice to meet you, Mr. Crystal, Mrs. Crystal, you boys here. Listen. I’m very sorry for what happened to your car last night. Very sorry. It was my fault, it was an accident, believe me, it was an accident. If it wasn’t an accident, this would be a condolence call.

“I talked to my ‘friends’ and they told me you didn’t tell the cops nothing. So I want to make it up to you.”

“Okay, Mr. Ormento. I have my insurance card. We’ll just put it through the insurance company.”

Big John interrupted Dad with an impatient laugh, the same way he probably interrupted somebody who wasn’t beating up a guy properly. “No, no, no, no. We’re not going to do something stupid like put it through the insurance company, no. Cuz let’s face it, we *are* the insurance company.”

“I want to do something special for you.”

Dad looked confused. “What do you mean ‘special’?”

“I asked around about you, Mr. Crystal. People like you. They respect what you do, and they like your wife and your boys here. Don’t you think you should be driving around in a car that more befits a man of your altitude?”

We all looked confused.

“What are you trying to say, Mr. Ormento?”

“What I’m trying to say is this, Mr. Crystal. I want to buy you a new car, any car you want, the car of your choice.”

Things were looking up! Any car we want? The car of our choice? Oh baby, I was overjoyed! All those great cars were now rolling around my brain, like a slot machine: the Impala, the Bel Air, the Thunderbird, the Corvette! Oh, a Corvette! *Think with me, Pop, think with me, Corvette, Corvette, Corvette*, I said to myself over and over, trying to send my message telepathically.

“Let’s just get this car fixed,” Dad said.

Shit! I said to myself.

Big John looked angry, and as he stepped forward, he got bigger.

“Let me ask you something, Mr. K . . .” I wanted to correct him, but I have this thing about dying. “You are refusing my offer? Huh? That upsets me. You know, that really upsets me, and it confuses me. Why would you not want me to buy you a new car?”

Dad stood tall and simply said, “Because, Mr. Ormento, *I* bought this one.”

There was silence as they stared at each other. It got tense. Big John’s shark eyes trying to intimidate, as they lasered into Dad’s eyes, trying to push him to reconsider, and probably thinking,

How can I get this guy's whole body into a can of tuna. Dad, only five foot nine and 160 pounds, just stared back at Big John, unafraid.

I looked at my mother. She looked at my father, and she smiled a smile of pride that I've never, ever forgotten. She took one step over next to him, put her arm around Pop, and together the two of them smiled at Big John Ormento.

Those were my parents.

Two weeks later, the car came back. Well, Big John knew a lot about bodywork because the car looked great, and after we opened the trunk to make sure there were no bodies in it, we took it out for a ride. And everything was great until Dad tried to make a right turn. Almost impossible. The car barely reacted to Dad's turning of the steering wheel. It moaned and groaned; so did Dad. The car just couldn't make right turns very well. They couldn't fix that. You actually had to make three left turns in order to make one right turn. But it didn't matter; we had our new car.

They put me up front, in the middle, with my brothers in the back. I sat up front because I was the one who didn't need legroom; and I still don't. I always sat in between my mom and my dad because my mom never drove the car when Dad was around . . . never. Dad was very much a man of the times. He was the hunter, gatherer, driver . . . er . . . But when we were sitting like this, she would always take her left arm and put it behind my head and let it rest lightly on the right shoulder of the man that she loved so much. And I would sit in the middle, and I would look at him, my first hero, as he drove that car, his left arm outside the window getting that little yarmulke tan around his elbow, and smoking his cigarette—because they told us in the fifties, “Cigarettes taste good and are so good for you.” And he looked like he was driving a Rolls-Royce or a Bentley, never for once thinking he was driving a gray-on-gray Plymouth Belvedere that couldn't make right turns. That was my dad.

He worked so hard for us all the time. He held down two jobs, including weekend nights. The only day we really had alone with him was Sunday. Sunday was our day for my two brothers and I to put on a show and make them laugh. Sunday was our day to go up on the boardwalk in Long Beach and play Skee-ball or Fascination, go to the batting cage, play baseball, go bowling, or to the movies, even a Broadway show. Sunday night was our night to go out to eat together. We'd always go out for Italian food, or Chinese food, because on Sunday nights, Jews are not allowed to eat their own food. That's in the Talmud.

“On the seventh day, God rested and then went to Twin Dragons for dinner, because He loved the ribs.” If you go to any Italian restaurant on a Sunday, there are only Jewish families. If you go to a Chinese restaurant, there are only Jewish families. Have you ever seen a Chinese family at a deli on a Sunday having a big plate of pickled herring, and chopped liver? It doesn't happen.

And Dad would come in like three, four o'clock on a Sunday morning after working all weekend. Just as the sun came up, I would tiptoe over to their bedroom, which was right next to my room in the back, and I would quietly open the door just a little, and there they would be, Mom and Dad, lying there, looking so quiet, and so peaceful together. And I would sit in the doorway waiting for him to wake up, just to see what we were going to do together that day. I just couldn't wait for Sundays. I couldn't wait for Sundays. He died suddenly when I was fifteen. I once calculated that I had roughly 700 Sundays. That's it. 700 Sundays. Not a lot of time for a kid to have with his dad.



Birth

New Hep Cat
Jack Crystal, producer of jazz concerts and jazz record authority, welcomed a brand new son, William Edward, Sunday. This is the third Crystal son and gives Jack a potential hot trio.



Circumcision

CHAPTER

Sunday Number One. I'm born. Sunday, March 14, 1948, in Manhattan at Doctor's Hospital overlooking Gracie Mansion, 7:30 in the morning. They tell me that I was a rather difficult birth.

"Keep pushing, Helen. Baby's starting to come now. Here he comes, Helen. Keep pushing. How do you feel, Helen?"

"Fuck you. This hurts, that's how I feel."

"There it is. I can see the face. Oh, that's a cute-looking baby, Helen."

“Who does it look like?”

“Joe Louis, actually. Uh-oh. The baby’s shoulders are too big for you. We need forceps to get the baby out of there.”

Oh, my God! I saw the forceps coming toward me. I said, “You know what? I’ll come back later, you’re all so busy. Thanks anyway. I’ll see you in a little while.”

They pulled me out. Somebody slapped me on the ass. Pow! WAAAAAH! They put me on a cold scale. WAAAAAH! The doctor sounded like the man behind the counter at the deli as he looks at the needle on the scale after he puts more than half a pound of corned beef on it . . .

“It’s a little bit over. You still want it?”

Yes, a rather difficult birth, which my relatives always reminded me about every time they saw me.

“Oh, there’s the little guy who almost split his mother in two.”

“Billy, don’t take this personal, but your mother didn’t sit down until you were twelve years old.”

I didn’t take it personal.

Sunday Number Two: my circumcision. This I took personal.

This is no way to be brought into the world. I’m on a pillow, totally naked, eight pounds, nine ounces. I looked like a boiled chicken. I’m brought out in front of the family by a guy with bad breath and a beard. He puts me down on a table, grabs a razor and my penis and cuts off the top . . . six to eight inches . . .

“Get me the electric knife. Stand back when I yell timber. Come on. Whoa. Look at that. That’s a five-skin! Look at the size of this thing! Hey, throw it on the car. It looks like it may rain.”

I’m screaming in pain, “My dick, my dick!” and then I heard my Uncle Herman yell, “Let’s eat!” Because, you find out, in Yiddish “bris” means blood and buffet.

Sunday Number Three. I got a gun. I was only two weeks old, but if somebody was coming near my dick again, they were going down.

Now you can’t pick the family that you’re born into. That’s just the roll of the dice. It’s just luck. But if I could pick these people, I would pick them over and over again because they were lunatics. Fun lunatics. What a crazy group of people, and great characters too. It was like the *Star Wars* bar, but everybody had accents.

Good people, immigrant people who came here and made something of themselves. There were two sides of our family, the Crystal side, and the Gabler side.

The Crystal side was small. It was Dad, his brother, Berns, and their sister, Marcia. There weren’t that many cousins in his extended family. His mom, Sophie, was a sweet Russian woman. We actually look a great deal alike. She had left Kiev when she was just fifteen. Told her parents she was going to take a walk, and made her way to America.

My grandfather, Julius Crystal, died when my dad was just sixteen. He was a very interesting man. His immigration forms said he was also from Russia, but recent information has him from Finland.

Julius had been an actor in the Yiddish theater. He translated *King Lear* into Yiddish and he played Lear with Sophie playing Cordelia. He also wrote a book called *The Tyranny of God*. They lived for a while in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and moved to Brooklyn when Dad was around nine. I once asked Grandma Sophie, Why did they live in Grand Rapids? She said, "That's where the train stopped."

My Aunt Marcia was one of my favorites, a beautiful red-haired blue-eyed woman, with a great sense of humor. I always felt extremely close to her. Uncle Berns was the baby, all six foot four and 250 pounds of him. He was a true eccentric, bigger than life. He had the mime ability of a circus clown, and he could do magic tricks, and would always use one of us as his assistant. He seemed more like our older brother. He was the uncle you could play with. He was an artist, who had actually been ordered by Eisenhower during World War II to interpret the war on canvas. His first assignment was D-Day. His life story would later become a documentary film directed by my daughter Lindsay, for HBO.

The Gabler side was Mom's family. She was one of six brothers and sisters. The generation before them was a mixture of the Kasindorfs, from Rostov on the Don in Russia, and the Gablers of Vienna.

My Grandma Susie (Kasindorf) was one of nine children. Grandpa Julius (Gabler) was one of four brothers, and all of these people had a lot of kids; they really took the "Be fruitful and multiply" quote from the Bible very seriously. So when we all got together for a holiday dinner, it was an enormous crowd of colorful characters. There was my Aunt Lee, who was one of the first woman bank president in America; her brother, my Uncle Sid Kasindorf, who was an inventor. He actually built one of the first transistor radios; he put it in a box of wooden stick matches, and it was featured at the World's Fair of 1939. My Aunt Jean (Mom's sister) and Uncle Greenie were husband-and-wife doctors. Greenie wrote the first papers on ambulating patients after surgery. There were furriers and architect accountants, a baby bonnet salesman, even a suspected spy.

Our Russian cousin Albert Parry (born Paretsky), who knew Lenin as a teenager, and had escaped his revolution after Lenin had told him how bloody the revolution would be, came to America, taught Russian Studies at Cornell University, wrote several controversial books on Russia and may have helped track down war criminals after World War II. We went to Russia together, when I did an HBO special there in 1989—Albert's first trip back in over seventy years—and Gorbachev personally had to approve his visit. Another of my mom's cousins was married to a woman whom I knew as Cousin Marjorie. She was a quiet, very lovely woman. Only a few years ago I found out she was actually the *Marjorie* that *Marjorie Morningstar* was written about.

The rest of the family was not quite as exotic. Hardworking people. The kind of people who spoke mostly Yiddish, which is a combination of German and phlegm. This is a language of coughing and spitting; until I was eleven, I wore a raincoat. These people love to eat and talk at the same time, so if you're on the other side of a sour cream conversation, they'll spray their breakfast all over you.

"No, no, no. He's a schmuck! He's a goniff! He's a putz. He's a prick!" If you're in a blue suit, you're a Jackson Pollock like that! You end up wearing more than they ate.

My younger uncles were great guys. They were charismatic, great athletes, they drank a lot, had a lot of girlfriends. Picture the Kennedys, except they're eating flanken and playing mah-jongg. They were the Jewish Kennedys. I always thought the Kennedys would have been more fun if they were Jewish. It would have relaxed them a bit. Think of them around the table, during the holidays.

"Momma Rose, this lobster bisque is fantastic. What a novel way to break the Yom Kippur fast. Teddy, you're eating my kugel, Teddy. Stop eating my kugel, Teddy."

"Jack loves a shiksa. Jack loves a shiksa."

"You cut that out. Bobby, have a bissel of the tssimis, just a bissel."

“Some people see things the way they are and say why, I dream things that never were and say, WHY THE HELL NOT?”

The older relatives weren't as much fun. They always looked miserable. They had faces like fists. Always with a frown. I called them the upside-down people, because if you put them upside down, they would look so happy. And they would argue about anything, like who was sicker.

“Murray, what are you talking about a fever. A hundred and six isn't a fever. I was in a coma for seven months. I never missed a day's work.”

Cranky people but proud of their heritage. They were proud of who they were. There are some Jewish people today who are still uncomfortable being Jewish:

“Levine, party of six please.”

“*Excuse me. You mean Leviine.*”

“Shapiro, party of four.”

“*Pardon me. You mean Shapiiiiro.*”

“FleCHman, are the FleCHmans here?”

“*Excuse me. You mean Miller.*”

I have a theory as to why they were so miserable. I think they were miserable because they were hot. Let me explain: Open your family photo albums. Let's face it, we all have the same five relatives. They just jump from album to album.

They all looked exactly alike, and they all wore the same thing: big mink hats, beaver hats, earmuffs, gloves, mukluks, Persian lamb coats, mink coats, beaver coats . . . all at the same time. The women are wearing a fox stole, head, claws and tail, with a clasp that was always the fox biting its own foot. Wasn't that terrifying? It had a look in its glass eye that seemed to say, “How the hell did I end up here?” They were wearing stuffed animals, the Norman Bates line of clothing. It's like the old joke—two minks in the slaughterhouse. One turns to the other and says, “Well, see you in shul.”

I guarantee you, we all have this same photograph. A couple is standing there, covered with every conceivable pelt, hats pulled down over their ears, you can see just a sliver of their unhappy faces, and the caption reads: “At the beach, August, 1912.” They're hot.

When I was growing up, we had this whole other group that was living with us. An extended family. This group was not speaking Yiddish. They were speaking a language that they actually made up themselves. This group was speaking jive talk. They were speaking hip talk. They were smoking cigarettes with no writing on them. They were jazz musicians, mostly African-American and some of the greatest players in the world. It was Jews and jazz forever. The house always smelled of brisket and bourbon. How did this happen? One man was responsible, and he unknowingly changed my life. He was my Uncle Milt Gabler.



Mom and Uncle Milt



Uncle Milt at the Commodore Music Shop

CHAPTER

*F*or years and years, my grandfather had this little music store on 42nd Street between Lexington and Third that he called the Commodore Music Shop. And in it, he sold radios, electronic devices, that kind of thing. But during the summer months, he rented this little cottage on the ocean, a place called Silver Beach in Whitestone, under where the Throggs Neck Bridge is now. And at the end of the point

there was a wealthy man who had an estate. In the garden he had an outdoor dance pavilion, which overlooked the sea, and he would hire Dixieland bands to play so his friends could dance and have an illegal cocktail.

During the summer months, my young Uncle Milt and his sister Helen, who would become my mom, would swim out to the point at night and hide by the dock treading water, watching the rich people party. Under those summer moons, my mom fell in love with dancing, and my Uncle Milt fell in love with the music, with the hot jazz.

Milt was a student at Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan, and after school he worked in my grandfather's store. So one day, with the music in his mind, he takes one of the speakers from one of the radios, puts it over the front door transom of the Commodore Music Shop and dials it into the local jazz station that plays Bix Beiderbecke records. Now the great Bix's hot cornet jazz is blasting out onto 42nd Street. And as people are walking by, hearing the music, they start changing direction, and coming into the store. "Hey, you guys sell these records?" But there weren't any.

So Milt gets an idea. He runs to his father.

"Hey, Pop."

"Don't sneak up on me, Milt. I thought you were a Cossack. I could have killed you."

"Pop, listen. We can sell jazz records. Everybody's coming in and wanting these jazz records, Pop. We should sell jazz records."

"Milt, why do I want to get involved with that crap for?"

"We could make a couple of bucks."

"Okay. I'm in."

So they start licensing the master recordings of out-of-print records from some of the local record companies in town, and they start reissuing these out-of-print records with just a plain, white label that said "Commodore" on them. And these reissued jazz records started selling really well.

Now young Milt starts going to all of the jazz clubs that were in Manhattan at the time. This is a particularly great time for jazz in New York. The clubs were all over town. In the Village, there was a club called Nick's. Then later, Eddie Condon, the great guitarist, opened his own club, and oddly enough he called it "Eddie Condon's." Jimmy Ryan's was on 52nd Street. And then there was Leon & Eddie's and the Onyx Club.

Milt starts going to Harlem and meeting all the great musicians in town from New Orleans, Kansas City and Chicago, all of these great original jazz giants, who play the same music but with different styles. And he gets another idea. He goes back to his father.

"Hey, Pop."

"Again with the sneaking up on me. Who died and made you a Cherokee? What is it?"

"Pop, listen. I want to produce my own records. Why are we making money for everybody else with these reissues for? I want to make my own jazz records, Pop. I can do it."

"Why would I want to get involved with that crap for? I hate jazz."

"We can make a couple of bucks."

"Okay. I'm in!"

So, on the day after Benny Goodman's legendary "Sing Sing Sing" concert in 1938—with Benny's

searing clarinet and Gene Krupa's astounding, pulsating drum solo, Swing music was played for the first time ever in Carnegie Hall and it knocked the music world on its ass—Milt gets Goodman's sidemen and his now good friends, the great jazz guitarist Eddie Condon, and the best clarinetist in town (Benny left town that morning), Pee Wee Russell, and they go into a studio, and they do something my Uncle Milt never did before in his life. He produces two records: "Jada" and "Love Is Just Around the Corner." And the Commodore jazz label is born, the first independently owned jazz label in the world, and the records do great. Then Milt gets yet another idea. He decides to sell the discs by mail, so he starts something called "The United Hot Record Club of America." He invented the mail order business in the record industry. He was only twenty-seven years old.

The word gets out to all the jazz artists around the country, that there's this young producer who has a great set of ears and an even bigger heart. Now everybody wants to do a session with my Uncle Milt on what is now our family business, the Commodore jazz label. Milt was a natural producer. He was a charismatic man, with a great laugh, and booming voice. He also was a great judge of character. He understood the musicians. He spent so much time getting to know them, he realized that he didn't have to get too creative with their talents. Make them comfortable, he thought, and make it sound like they were on stage "jammin'." He placed the microphones in the studio, so they would play together not separately, as was the norm, and he would simply bring a couple of bottles of whiskey, a carton of cigarettes, and turn them loose. He let them play it the way they felt it. He let them play it the way they created it. Sometimes, on one Commodore record, there would be three cuts of the very same song. He would press all three cuts because there was a better solo, the beat was different, or there was just something about it that the musicians liked. He put them all on the same record, and they were grateful to him for it. He said, "Listen. Who am I to tell them how to play this? After all, this is jazz, America's only true art form."

So when I was a kid growing up, my father was now managing the Commodore Music Shop and he had become the authority on jazz and jazz records in the city. And this little store—it was only nine feet wide—was now the center of jazz not only in New York City but in the world, because that little mail order business was now third worldwide behind Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward, just selling Commodore and other jazz records.

Milt turned over the store and the running of the label to my father, his brother-in-law, because he went on to become a vice president in charge of Artists and Repertoire at Decca Records. For thirty years, he had one of the greatest careers that any producer's ever had. From 1941 to '73, he changed the way that people listened to music, and not just in jazz. In rhythm and blues, it was the great Louis Jordan. Remember the musical *Five Guys Named Moe*? That was all of the music that they did together. And the big song that he co-wrote was called, "Choo Choo Cha Boogie," which actually brought about the beginnings of rock and roll. In folk music, it was the Weavers and Burl Ives.

In pop music, it was the Tommy Dorsey Band, the Mills Brothers, the Ink Spots, the Andrews Sisters, Bing Crosby, Hoagy Carmichael, Judy Garland, even Jerry Lewis's "Rock-a-Bye Your Baby." In jazz, it was Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald singing duets, and Lionel Hampton. He also wrote "Danke Schoen" for Wayne Newton and he told him, "Wayne, strap 'em up. You'll hit the high notes." The other songs he's responsible for: "Three Coins in the Fountain," "Volare," "Red Roses for a Blue Lady." In his career at Decca he produced thirty records that sold a million copies each. He's in the Grammy Hall of Fame, and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame for a little thing he produced called "Rock Around the Clock" with Bill Haley and the Comets. "Rock Around the Clock" is one of rock's anthems, and ironically led to the demise of the music that Milt so loved, hot Dixieland jazz.

Going to the Commodore Music Shop was the greatest fun because now it was my dad's place. I

remember my first trip in. It was my fifth birthday, the first time he and I went into the City alone together. We drove in from Long Beach. And that was the first time I saw the skyline from a distance and I thought I was going to the Emerald City. We drove into the Midtown Tunnel, Dad explaining to me that we were now actually underwater. The tunnel was built under the East River connecting Manhattan and Long Island. I was scared. Especially when drops of condensation would hit the windshield. I thought for sure it was leaking, and soon we would be engulfed in water, like the Egyptians in the Red Sea. (I had seen *The Ten Commandments*.) Manhattan was incredible to me. The awesome buildings, towering over us. After we parked the car, we walked to the store. Dad pointed out the Chrysler Building, its silver skin gleaming in the morning sun. We went into this little coffee shop, and that's when I discovered my dad's secret life. As we sat down, the guy behind the counter came over, a big smile on his face.

"Hey, Jack. How you doing?"

"Good, Sam. How are you?"

"Who the hell is this guy?" I thought. "How does he know my father?" Now he smiled at me . . .

"You must be Billy, huh? I hear you're the funny one."

Who the hell is this guy?

"What are you going to have, Jack, the usual?"

"Yeah," Dad said. I couldn't believe it: My father had a usual! (I didn't know what a "usual" was but it sounded important, so I wanted one.)

"So what are you going to have, Billy?" the counterman asked me.

"Um, the usual." So there I was having "the usual" with my dad—battered roll, cup of coffee and cigarette. I was five.

When you went to the store, you never knew who was going to be there. You'd walk in and Louis Armstrong would be there or Count Basie or Duke Ellington. Rosemary Clooney was in the store all the time. These were some of the people I was around when we were growing up. And the jazz was blasting through the speakers of the store. My grandfather was now basking in his new success, dealing with the patrons in his inimitable shy way.

"Hey. No dogs allowed in the store. What? I don't care if you're blind! Read the goddamn sign."

There were booths, so you could listen to the records and decide if you wanted to buy them or not. Everybody was listening or talking jazz. *Cosmopolitan* and *Life* magazine did pieces on the store and they called it "The Crummiest Shrine in the World."

That day, my fifth birthday, Dad gave me a broom and let me sweep the floor with him before the first customer came in. I loved doing that with him. He took me into one of the soundproof booths, sat me down and put on the recording of *Peter and the Wolf*. I listened and watched him through the glass as he waited on customers. Everyone looked so happy to see him. I was getting to know him, in a different way. He seemed important to them also.

Later Pop took me out to lunch, just the two of us for the very, very first time. We stepped out of the store and headed west on 42nd Street. We passed the Commodore Hotel, which is how the store got its name. We went into Grand Central Terminal, past the Oyster Bar, up the ramp into the Great Hall with all of those people waiting. And I'm thinking, Why is he bringing me here on my birthday? And he said, "Bill, look at the ceiling. I come here every day for lunch. Isn't it magnificent? Happy Birthday kid."

It's so beautiful . . . a hand-painted map of the Zodiac, constellations, and all the heavens. It's still the best birthday I ever had in my life, just sitting there alone with my dad, having a Nedick's hot dog under a beautiful sky of fake stars.

That birthday was on a Friday, which meant after the store closed, I got a special treat. I got to go to Dad's second job. For seven years he had been producing free jazz concerts at a place called Jimmie Ryan's on 52nd Street. People loved the Sunday concerts at 3:00 in the afternoon. He never charged admission, he did it for free just so people would get to know the music and get to know these great musicians. That's really all he cared about—the music and these great players.

Dad put on concerts wherever he could, Rye Playland, an amusement park, on aircraft carriers for the Navy, even Carnegie Hall, where he produced a concert with the father of the blues, W. C. Handy who had written "St. Louis Blues." Handy was blind, the first blind person I ever saw in my life. Dad had a special feeling for him, and so he started producing concerts at a place called the Lighthouse for the Blind in New York City, a wonderful center for sightless people. It was one of his favorite places to put on shows. I once asked him, "Why do you like it there so much, they can't see?" He said, "Yeah, but they hear better than anybody."

In 1949, he wanted a bigger venue so more people could hear the music, so he rented out a catering hall, a ballroom where they did weddings and bar mitzvahs, on the Lower East Side at 111 Second Avenue between 6th and 7th Streets. It was called the Central Plaza. And he started something there on Friday and Saturday nights that became sort of legendary in New York's jazz circles, and he simply called them "The Sessions."

Everybody came to play. With the rise of swing, and the modern jazz of Miles, Monk, Dizzy and Coltrane, the Central Plaza was one of the only places that these original Dixieland artists could come and jam, and the crowds would not only listen, but get up and dance. This is before rock and roll, so Dixieland jazz was the music that college kids would come into New York to dance to. The shows started at 7:00, and ended around 3:00 in the morning, usually when the great trumpet player, Jimmy McPartland, would stand up and play "When the Saints Go Marching In."

My dad was happiest there, I know it, because he got to produce these shows the way he wanted to. He didn't just book existing bands, he would put them together. The guys would call in looking for a gig, and every weekend he experimented with the players, like a chemist, always looking for the perfect combination and the perfect sound. I used to love to answer the phone, not only because I thought someday somebody would call telling me they were going to take me to Hollywood, but I loved talking to the musicians. One of my favorites was Willie "The Lion" Smith. Willie was a very rare and charming man. He was a black Jewish man, who had also been a cantor in a synagogue at one time. He would call, and if I answered he would speak fluent Yiddish to me. I didn't know any Yiddish, but I would nod, and say "Hmm" once in a while, just so Willie would think I was following the conversation. I'd say, "Do you want to talk to my dad?" Willie would say, "Vat Den Bubbeleh, I like talking vit you, but you don't have any pockets." (Meaning Dad was the one who could pay him.)

A couple of years ago, *The New York Times* was doing a story on my dad, and they asked me to talk to some of the surviving musicians. One of Dad's regulars, Conrad Janis, who is still a great trombone player, told me that Dad was the "Branch Rickey" of jazz. And when I heard that, I felt so proud because it never occurred to me back then when I was growing up.

It meant my dad was one of the first producers to integrate bands, to play black players with white players. And oddly, that wasn't happening a lot even in New York back in the late forties and fifties, when the Central Plaza was at its height. The players loved Dad because he would do this, and he loved them back. When he played them, he paid them the best he could, and when they died, he ran

benefits for their families. They really were his other set of sons, and my brothers and I understood it because we loved them too. If Dad made a buck, he gave them eighty-five cents. Which is probably why we had a gray-on-gray Plymouth Belvedere.

That night at the Plaza, I discovered my dad's other secret life. We were waiting for the show to start and he says to me, "Billy, don't you move. Don't move. I've got to do something. I'll be right back, and then we'll go downstairs to Ratner's and have cake. Don't move."

What he had to do was emcee the show. I didn't know that he did this too. Suddenly, there he was behind the microphone. He had the audience in the palm of his hand. He was really charming and witty, and you could see how much he loved presenting this music to the world, and how much the players loved that he was the guy doing it. It was a thrill for me to see my dad behind that microphone. When I used to host the Grammy Awards, I would think that somehow I was channeling him, because I was doing the same thing he did decades before but I was introducing the great musicians of my day.

It was on this night, my fifth birthday, that I performed for an audience for the very first time. I was in the band room before the show with all of these fantastic musicians, a few I knew from the house, guys my uncle described as having "such big souls" and great names too: Hot Lips Page, Pee Wee Russell, Willie "The Lion" Smith, Buster Bailey, Henry "Red" Allen and the great Roy Eldridge.

Roy was a fantastic trumpet player and he wasn't very tall, so his nickname was "Little Jazz." When he met me for the first time, he called me "Littlest Jazz." Everybody else called me "Face." That was my nickname given to me by Zutty Singleton and Willie "The Lion" Smith. They were, along with Tyree Glenn, my favorites. They called me Face because I could make their faces. I could imitate them and it was easy, because they were all such great characters. So, that night, somebody put me up on a sax case and that meant I had a stage.

"Hey, listen up, you got to hear what the Face can do. Face, do the joke about Zutty. Zutty, get over here. This is about you. Hit it, Face."

I imitated his voice and his mannerisms, eyes wide open, filled with joy, the voice, Satchmo-like, raspy from the cigarettes and the booze, a real nightclub voice, coming out of my five-year-old mouth . . .

"Zutty goes in to get his hair cut. He says to the haircut cat, 'How much is a haircut?'

"He says, 'Well, you know, a haircut is two dollars.'

"He says, 'Wow, two dollars. That's a little heavy for a haircut. How much is a shave?'

"Well, you know, Zutty, a shave is just a dollar.'

"And Zutty said . . ." as I pointed to my hair, "'Okay, baby. Shave it.'"

Everyone cracked up. All of them coming over to give me some skin.

"Face, My Man the Face . . . Can you dig that? I knew that you could."

Then they ran up onstage and played. I was in heaven. The music went right into my soul. I was only five years old, but I understood my uncle and my dad just like that. I just fell in love with Dixieland jazz. For me it's easy because I think it's the happiest music in the world. And when it's good and it's really cooking, to me, Dixieland is like the end of the Kentucky Derby . . .

"And down the stretch they come. The trombone sets the pace, cornet takes the lead, clarinet comes up on the outside. Then the drummer goes to the whip, and it's a photo finish as they all cross

the line together.”

And I couldn't help myself. I ran up onstage and I started tap-dancing with them. Mom had been teaching me to tap-dance, but I only could get the right leg to work. The left just stood there watching the right one, as I danced to “Muskrat Ramble” spinning around only using my right leg, looking like a dog chasing its tail. The guys on the bandstand looked over and smiled, like I did this all the time, and the audience went wild. I loved every second. I think of that feeling every time I'm onstage. It's like my dad said, “Once you hear the music, you can't stand still.”

Of all the great people who were recording for my uncle and being produced in concert by my dad, Billie Holiday was by far the greatest. I think there's only two artists, Sinatra and Billie, that when you hear one note, you know you're in the presence of a genius.

And I was so blessed to be in her presence when I was a little boy because of her relationship with my uncle and my dad. She used to call me Mister Billy and I would call her Miss Billie. She had done most of her great recordings on Commodore, and later followed Milt to Decca with songs like “Embraceable You,” “Fine and Mellow,” which he wrote with her, “Sunny Side of the Street,” “As Time Goes By,” “I Cover the Waterfront,” “Good Morning Heartache” and “Lover Man.”

But her most important song was one called “Strange Fruit,” which was very controversial because it was about lynching black people down South. Nobody wanted to hear this song. When Billie introduced the song at the Café Society, nobody wanted to be reminded about what was happening in our America of 1939, and nobody would record “Strange Fruit.” Even her great producer at Columbia Records, John Hammond, wouldn't touch it. She was frustrated, so she turned to her friend, my Uncle Milt. And he told me years later she sang it for him the first time a cappella. Can you imagine that? That aching voice and that aching lyric. “Southern trees bear a strange fruit, blood on the leaves and blood at the root, black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze. Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees . . .” He told me, “Billy, I cried like a baby. And I said to her, ‘Lady Day, listen, I don't care if we sell one record. People must hear this song. They've got to hear this song. We've got to get this made somehow.’”

So they worked out a special arrangement with Vocalian Records, and Billie Holiday, a great black jazz artist, and my Jewish Uncle Milt together recorded “Strange Fruit” a song about lynching down South, the song that *Time* magazine in December of 1999 would call the song of the century. I'm so proud to say it's on the family label, the Commodore.

One night, my dad was producing one of Billie Holiday's concerts. It was at a place called the Stuyvesant Casino, Second Avenue around 9th Street. We all got there in the afternoon to watch her rehearse and to hang out with Dad of course, and Miss Billie said something to me that totally changed my life.

“Hey, Mister Billy, let's go to the movies.”

So Billie Holiday and I walked down Second Avenue together, past Ratner's, past the Central Plaza, to a little movie theater next door, called perfectly enough, the Loews Commodore. It later became known as the Fillmore East. And there sitting on Billie Holiday's lap, I saw my first movie. And the movie was *Shane*: Alan Ladd, Van Heflin, Jean Arthur and JACK PALANCE! and this kid who I looked like, Brandon De Wilde. He was an extraordinary eight-year-old actor. I couldn't believe it. It proved to me that even if you're four foot six, you could be forty feet tall.

At the end of the movie, Shane rides off into the sunset. The kid runs after him and he screams,

“Shane . . . come back.”

And Miss Billie whispered in my ear, “He ain’t never coming back.”

I sat there, the projection light flickering behind me, the music swelling as well as the tears in my eyes, and I looked at that kid on the big screen, and I wanted it to be me. And you know something? It was a Sunday.



Aunt Sheila

CHAPTER

My grandmother once asked Louis Armstrong at a Seder, “Louis, have you tried just coughing it up?”

Louis laughed so hard, throwing his head back, pounding the table . . .

Grandma Susie was hilarious. She was my mom’s mother, a big woman weighing around three hundred pounds. (At one time she was worth three electoral votes.) She was the One-Liner Queen. Sh

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