

Asbury Park:

A Jersey Shore

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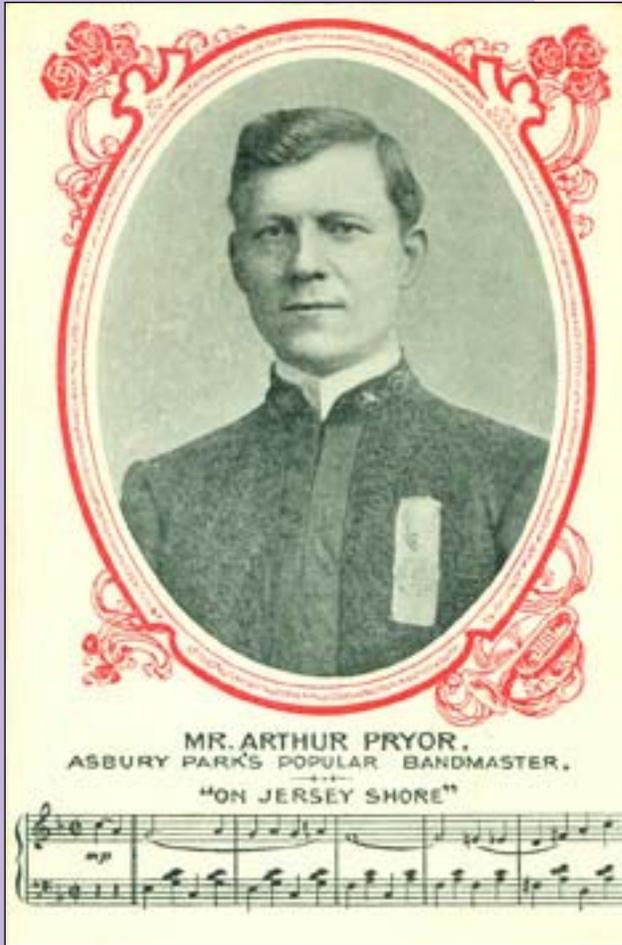
Deep Purple
& Pinstripes

by Donna Troppoli

What does “The Ukulele Lady,” a songwriter, and “The Babe” all have in common with Asbury Park?

There are those who view history as a timeline—one event leading directly into another without diversion: “Time marches on!” Then there are others, like myself, who see it as a branching, web-like organic thing—a variety of unexpected contacts and off-beat juxtapositions uniting a variety of people and events. This is especially characteristic of the history of cities, where people, diverse, yet similar, dwell within close proximity and live overlapping lives. And so it is with my city, Asbury Park, where one story always leads to another (and another...).

Perhaps the constant rhythm of the waves on the shore destined Asbury Park to be a destination for music. Founded as a seaside resort by Methodist convert James Bradley in 1871, in its earliest days, only music of a religious nature was permitted. As its popularity grew, visitors demanded greater variety in their music, so concert bands with their wide repertoires came into favor. John Philip Sousa was the best known leader of this type of ensemble; he and his band performed next door in Ocean Grove thirteen times between 1910 and 1926. The lead trombonist with the Sousa Band was Arthur Pryor (1870-1942) who left Sousa and debuted his own band in 1903. He first played in Asbury Park in 1904, and was so popular that the Arthur Pryor Band performed there yearly through 1930, performing sixty concerts each summer. Pryor popularized Ragtime music in the area, and was also a composer of songs. “The Whistler and his Dog,” with its novel use of the piccolo, is perhaps the best known of these light pieces. In 1942, he returned to Asbury Park to conduct a special benefit concert to promote war bonds. Sadly, he suffered a stroke shortly before the date of the event, which was ultimately conducted by his son, Arthur Pryor, Jr.¹ The present Arthur Pryor Band Shell, atop the former Howard Johnson’s Restaurant on the Boardwalk at Fifth



Arthur Pryor, from the sheet music for “On Jersey Shore.”

Avenue dates from 1962 and could accommodate 1,400 concert-goers, often to listen to performances by the Asbury Park Municipal Band.² It presently awaits restoration.

The types of music on offer in Asbury Park during the first half of the Twentieth Century accommodated every musical genre and taste. A variety of sacred music styles filled the city’s many churches and synagogue. The city’s biggest venue, the Paramount Theater, featured opera, orchestral performances, and big budget Hollywood movies. Convention Hall, finally opened in 1930, was home to both conventions and musical performance and both halls had theatre organs. The Casino Arena and the larger hotels, such as the Berkeley Carteret, featured ballrooms that could accommodate dance bands. Smaller social clubs and bars featured local talent. The vibrant West Side, especially along

Springwood Avenue, was a showplace and an intergenerational incubator for jazz and blues performers, many with international reputations. And did I mention movie theatres? In its heyday, Asbury Park had six.³



Peter and May Singhi Breen De Rose - Radio's "Sweethearts of the Air"

(From the Collection of Sherrie Hoyer, used with permission)

The "American Songbook" was well-represented here by Peter De Rose, a composer of popular songs which were performed and recorded by many of the best known musical artists of the 20th century. In days when people often entertained themselves by playing their own musical instruments, May Singhi Breen De Rose provided musical instruction and sheet music. Both Peter and May De Rose were well-known musicians and entertainers who achieved the pinnacles of achievement within their respective musical careers. They were also happy to be residents of Asbury Park.

Heading west from the boardwalk on Eighth Avenue, there is a house overlooking Deal Lake with two large iron wheels incorporated into handrails beside steps leading up to the porch. These "wagon wheels" (read on for their significance) announce to passers-by that they have arrived at the house formerly owned by Peter and May De Rose—a house full of music, a house full of stories.

May Singhi Breen, known as "The Ukulele Lady," was born in 1895 in New

York City. She received her first ukulele as a Christmas gift, but since she didn't know how to play it, tried to return it to the department store for a bathrobe! When the store refused to accept it, she decided to make the best of the situation and take lessons. May turned out to be a skilled player of the "uke," and made a career as a ukulele player, arranger and instructor as well as an advocate for the instrument.

Her first recognition as a radio performer occurred when she and a few other young women formed "The Syncopators," a ukulele group. In 1923, she left the group when she met songwriter Peter De Rose and they were married in 1929. Peter and May performed in a popular NBC radio show from 1923 to 1939 called the "Sweethearts of the Air," which featured Peter on piano and May on ukulele. It showcased both of their talents and also allowed Peter to introduce many of his own songs.



Ukulele

May's efforts in promoting the ukulele contributed greatly to its being taken seriously as a musical instrument. Her slogan was "Uke can play the melody," and she emphasized the ukulele as a solo instrument. Perhaps a bit of historical background would be helpful in appreciating May's achievements. The ukulele originated in the 19th century as a Hawaiian interpretation of small guitar-like instruments brought to Hawaii by Portuguese immigrants. It became popular in the United States in the early 20th century, after it was introduced at the San Francisco International Exposition in 1915. Its popularity increased with amateur musicians in the Roaring Twenties due to its portability, low price and ease of playing. The word "ukulele" has been whimsically translated as "jumping flea," perhaps due to the action of one's fingers while playing it. A more dignified derivation of the name was given by Queen Lili'uokalani, the last Hawaiian monarch, meaning "the gift that came here," from the Hawaiian words *uku* (gift or reward) and *lele* (to come). Ukuleles have four strings or four courses of strings and commonly come in four sizes: soprano, concert, tenor, and baritone.

May taught ukulele in private schools and at her Uke Trades Publishing Company in New York City. A true musical pioneer, she was the first to teach ukulele in schools, as well as the first to record ukulele instruction, on a 78 rpm Victor label record titled "Ukulele Lesson."

When the question arose in the Musician's Union as to whether or not the ukulele could be classed as a legitimate musical instrument, May's efforts convinced the Union to vote in its favor. She then pursued standardization of the ukulele, exemplified by her use of the Universal D Tuning throughout her printed teaching methods and musical arrangements. Her published books include popular song folios with ukulele arrangements from the 1920s and instruction books from the 1950s. May was so popular that manufacturers such as P'Mico and Martin Guitar added instruments named for her to their ukulele lines. May's greatest contribution to ukulele history was convincing music publishers of the commercial value of sheet music arrangements for the ukulele; her own sheet music ukulele arrangements are more numerous than those of any other single person who ever wrote for this instrument.

Although not as commonly played as the guitar, the ukulele's popularity has continued to the present day through performers as diverse as Arthur Godfrey, Tiny Tim, George Harrison, Greg Hawkes, Amanda Palmer, Joe Strummer, and Jake Shimabukuro. Due to her enormous body of work for the "uke" it could be assumed that "The Ukulele Lady" has influenced many of its players. May Singhi Breen was inducted into the Ukulele Hall of Fame in 2000, and is presently its only female inductee.⁴

Peter De Rose was born in New York City in 1900, and his musical

ability was apparent at a young age. Taught piano by an older sister, his talents were such that he was able to publish his first song at age eighteen. Upon graduating DeWitt Clinton High School, he worked as a stock clerk in a music store. His successful song, “When You’re Gone, I Won’t Forget,” led to a job with music publisher G. Ricordi & Co. in 1920.

De Rose’s career spanned several decades known as the “Tin Pan Alley” years, and he composed some of the highest charting songs of the thirties and forties, which were performed by the best known recording artists of the time. Most often a composer of melodies, he collaborated with well-known lyricists such as Charles Tobias, Al Stillman, Carl Sigman, Mitchell Parish, and Billy Hill. His songs were also included in several Broadway productions. These included: *Yes, Yes, Yvette*, *Earl Carroll’s Vanities of 1928* and *Ziegfeld Follies of 1934* which included the song “Wagon Wheels.” This song was covered by Bing Crosby and Paul Robeson as well as memorialized in his home’s front stair handrails. Additional works included film scores for *Song of Love*, *The Fighting Seabees*, *On Moonlight Bay*, *About Face* and music for the 1941 *Ice Capades*.⁵

Peter De Rose’s best-known song is “Deep Purple,” written in 1934, originally as an instrumental piece for piano. Soon afterwards, Paul Whiteman created a big band arrangement for it; lyrics by Mitchell Parish were added a few years later. Feel free to sing along with the first verse of this sentimental favorite:

*When the deep purple falls over sleepy garden walls
And the stars begin to twinkle in the sky—
In the mist of a memory you wander back to me
Breathing my name with a sigh...*

(To hear the Sarah Vaughan rendition: <http://youtu.be/vWks5ZNBQ9U>)

This song was a hit for numerous artists and had an appeal that spanned several decades. The performers included: Larry Clinton & His Orchestra, Artie Shaw’s Band with Helen Forrest on vocals, Duke Ellington, Glenn Miller, Sarah Vaughan, The Dominoes (a doo-wop version), Screamin’ Jay Hawkins, and most recently, Donny and Marie Osmond. Nino Tempo & April Stevens’ version in 1963 won them the Grammy Award for the best rock and roll record.⁶

A list of the songs written by Peter De Rose is too long to be included in this article, but may be found in web sites devoted to American popular music. However, it is interesting to note that they were recorded by artists as varied as Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, Patsy Cline, Eddy Arnold, Louis Prima, Johnny Mathis, John Coltrane, Spike Jones, and Peggy Lee.⁷ And

the hits are still coming. “Marshmallow World,” his best known Christmas song, was covered as a cheeky duet by John Pizzarelli and Kristin Chenoweth in 2012.

Time for those pinstripes! Then as now, Asbury Park had its share of sports figures and sports stories. Arthur Augustus Zimmerman was the first world cycling champion, earning this title in 1893. He won over 1000 races during his athletic career. Although born in Camden and educated in Freehold, Zimmerman chose to manage an Asbury Park hotel after his retirement from cycling.⁸ Frank Budd competed in the 1956 Olympic Games in 1956 and was the world record holder for the 100 yard dash in 1961. He also played football for the Philadelphia Eagles and Washington Redskins. His achievements are honored each year at the Frank Budd Track Meet at Asbury Park High School.⁹ The late Scott “Bam Bam” Bigelow had a successful career as a professional wrestler, having won numerous championships.¹⁰

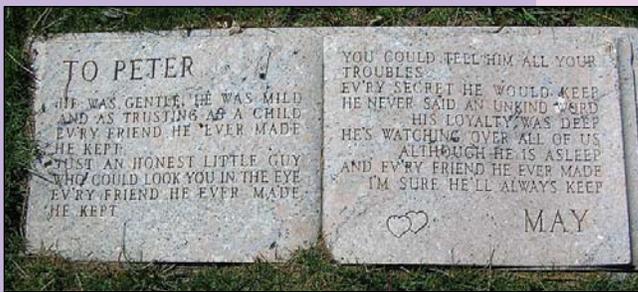
Fans of baseball may know that the New York Yankees held their spring training in Asbury Park in 1943. This was due to railroad travel restrictions (the teams travelled largely by train in those days) imposed by World War II conservation efforts, which only permitted the teams to train in the area east of the Mississippi and north of the Ohio Rivers. The same stadium where the Blue Bishops and Asbury Park Little League compete to the delight of their families, friends, and coaches was the playing field for the Bronx Bombers’ 1943 pre-season. Yankee greats Phil Rizzuto and Joe DiMaggio were absent from the roster, as they were serving in the armed

forces at that time. Travel restrictions were still in effect for the following two years, but in 1944 the Yankees moved their spring training to Atlantic City (reputed to offer more to entertain the ball players between practice sessions), where they remained for the last war time pre-season in 1945.¹¹

A unique Asbury Park story that combines both sports and music is Babe Ruth’s close friendship with Peter and May De Rose, which began around the time Babe joined the Yankees in 1920. Peter and May provided the musical entertainment at Ruth’s wedding to Claire Hodgson in April of 1929, which was held at the Bambino’s apartment on Riverside Drive. Although the “Bambino” may not have played ball in Asbury Park (having retired in 1935 after having been traded to the Braves in the same year¹²), he had been a frequent guest at their house on Eighth Avenue for some time. Babe Ruth had musical interests in common with the De Roses because was an amateur “uke” player himself, but is remembered in contemporary accounts as being more skilled with a bat. A now obscure



Babe Ruth



Peter De Rose's grave

baseball term, popular in the 1920s, was “ukulele hitter.” This denoted a player who hit mostly singles and few home runs—something the Sultan of Swat certainly was not!¹³

“Deep Purple” was one of Ruth’s favorite songs, and was played at his birthday parties by De Rose for over a decade. The time Ruth spent with the De Roses involved not only musical pursuits, but silly ones as well. Claire recalled when Babe and May had scallion eating contests, each racing to demolish a bowl of the pungent vegetables.¹⁴ In 1947 Babe, always sensitive to the needs of underprivileged children, created the Babe Ruth Foundation as his charitable legacy. A photograph in *The New York Times* featured the following year shows May’s grandson, Peter Bunch, making a donation of \$7.00 in pennies to the famous ballplayer, who was suffering with the cancer that would shortly take his life in August 1948.¹⁵ During his final hospitalizations, May coordinated the task of handling the vast amount of mail sent by well-wishers and fans.¹⁶

At a benefit for The Babe Ruth Foundation, held two months after the player’s death, Peter and May De Rose premiered a new song: “Babe,” written by Peter De Rose and Charles Tobias as a tribute to the immortal ball player. The difficulty of finding a rhyme for “Babe” was sidestepped with their lyric:

*That wonderful, wonderful Babe
The idol of every kid
Who had thrilled their dads
With the things he did.¹⁷*

Peter De Rose died at the age of fifty-three in New York City in 1953. He is buried beside May (d. 1970) in Kensico Cemetery, Valhalla, New York. His epitaph, which May composed for him, included the memorable phrase: “Every friend he ever made, he kept.”¹⁸ Peter De Rose was inducted into the Songwriter’s Hall of Fame in 1970.



With “Texas-sized” thanks and best wishes to Sherrie Hoyer, purveyor of instrumental instruction manuals and other musical accessories through her electronic emporium. Contact her at (mandolinbabes@ymail.com). Sherrie is a musical preservationist, multi-instrumentalist, musical educator and cowgirl historian. May you ride happy trails always, dear lady!

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