

BART HOWARD:

Flying To The Moon

By Peter Leavy

THE CABARET WORLD OF THE THIRTIES, forties and fifties pulsed with life. Most clubs had three shows a night at ten, midnight and two a.m. plus interval pianists for an oft formally attired crowd who came to hear stellar performers. Eartha Kitt, Portia Nelson, Mabel Mercer, Margaret Whiting, Johnny Mathis, Pearl Bailey, Kaye Ballard, Dorothy Loudon, Imogene Coca, Bobby Short, Harry Belafonte, Hildegard, Anita Ellis, Sylvia Syms, Celeste Holm, Edith Piaf, Georgia Gibbs, Hazel Scott, Julie Wilson — all were booked into rooms both big and small with glittering histories and loyal clientele.

Broadway and Hollywood names sought their diversions at such favored spots as Le Ruban Bleu, Cafe Society, Tony's, the Plaza Hotel's Persian Room, Bon Soir, Julius Monk's Upstairs at the Downstairs, Versailles, the RSVP, Spivy's Roof, the Blue Angel and the St. Regis Hotel's Maisonette. In the center of this world of celebrities, songs, singers and club owners was Bart Howard, pianist, accompanist, club emcee and composer of *In Other Words* (a.k.a. *Fly Me to the Moon*) and many other of America's most memorable songs.

For a youth from Burlington, Iowa, Bart Howard was moving in an awesome milieu from the time he was in his young twenties. He hobnobbed with Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo, millionairess "Joe" Carstairs, and virtually all the New York entertainment world. Some of Bart's history is already known. He's a frequent character in *Intimate Nights*, James Gavin's excellent book on cabaret, as well as in James Haskins' biography,

Mabel Mercer: A Life. Bart's history, in a word, was glamorous.

KT Sullivan, whose show of Bart Howard songs, *In Other Words*, had premiered and been recorded live at New York's showcase, Rainbow & Stars, agreed to join us for the interview at Bart's home in a bucolic area about 90 minutes north of New York.

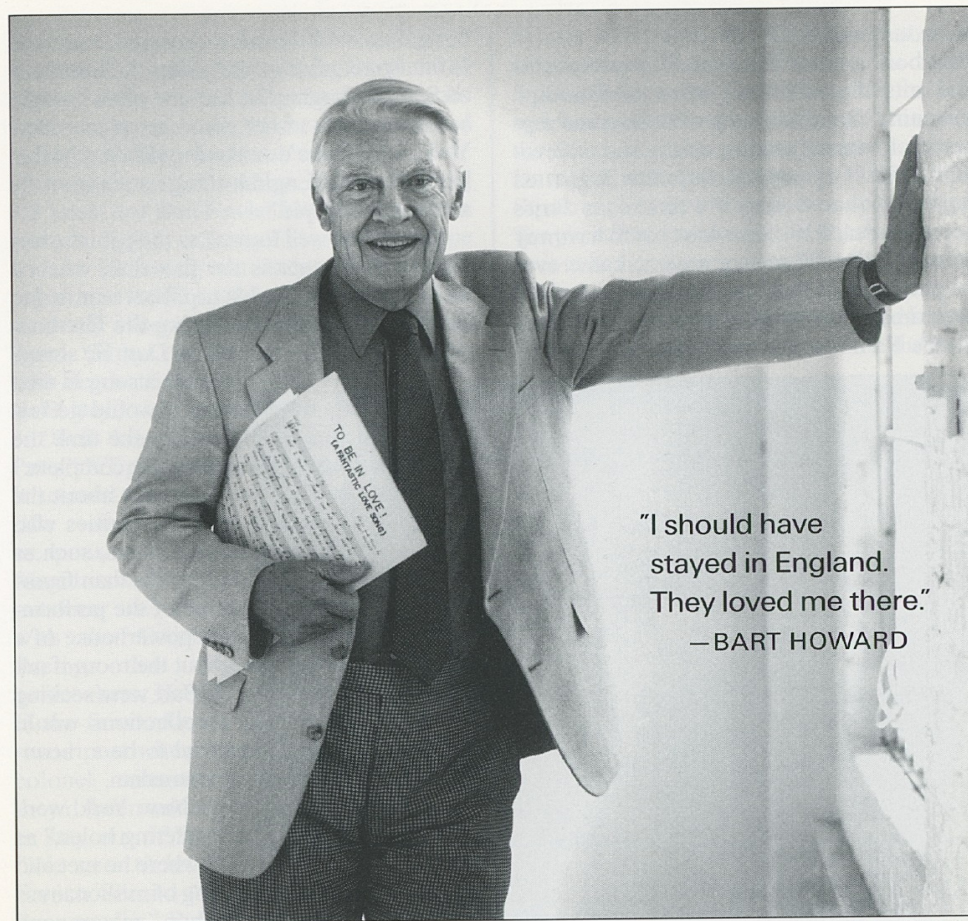
White-haired and cherubic at almost eighty-five, Bart, and his companion of fifty-four years, Tom Fowler (known to all as Bud), were waiting to greet us. We were ushered into a tasteful living room made even cozier by a small fire burning in the fireplace. As Bart took possession of an easy chair that had earmarks of being his accustomed settling place, Bud reappeared with a glass of pastis for Bart and white wine and hors d'oeuvres for the rest of us. Certainly, the interview was off to a good start.

Bart Howard's desire to be a songwriter emerged early. His music teacher had given him the price of a ticket to *The Desert Song* and, upon returning home, Bart wrote his own musical version of the show. Today, he points out with amusement that bootlegging paid for his music lessons but he discovered it the hard way. Coming to his grade school class one morning during Prohibition he found his classmates studying the front page of the local paper. His father, Bart learned, was the local moonshiner and the night before, his still had been raided and trashed. That's when he understood his mother's cry, "God, it's the Feds!"

By his early teens, Bart was playing piano at local clubs. By sixteen, he'd abandoned high school for a career in music, as did both



Photo: diGigeri



"I should have stayed in England. They loved me there."
—BART HOWARD

Jerome Kern and George Gershwin. His earliest pro gig was as pianist for a dance marathon that went on for days with significant prizes awarded to the couples who were able to stay on their feet and dance the longest. Bart, then still Howard Gustafsson, played throughout the day, sustained by mashed potatoes they periodically brought to the piano. (Years later, he would meet Greta Garbo, and learn that her true name also was Gustafsson.) That job led to one with a band "paying a living wage" of eleven dollars a week and one meal a day. Memorable experiences started early. He toured with Daisy and Violet Hilton, Siamese twin sisters retrospectively termed in a Philadelphia museum exhibition "two of the most scandalous and

dramatic conjoined twins in modern history," who were "forced by their guardian into a life in show business where they sang, danced and played the saxophone and violin." They were featured in two movies, *Freaks* and *Chained For Life*, and in a foreshadowing of the Tiny Tim wedding on network television a generation later, Daisy Hilton would be married in a ceremony held in the Cotton Bowl. Although few today recognize their names, the Broadway musical, *Sideshow*, (with cabaret star Phillip Officer among the cast) opened on Broadway in 1997 based upon the early lives of the forever joined sisters.

One of Bart's weirdest show biz experiences occurred when he played for Ray

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Bourbon, a notorious female impersonator and a self-proclaimed lover of Rudolph Valentino. Bourbon had a well-deserved reputation for being jealous, erratic and malevolent. Bart is quoted in *Intimate Nights* as reporting that during his tenure as Ray's accompanist, "He didn't want me to have any other friends. Whenever anyone came over he put sugar in their gas tanks or punctured their tires." Bart left Ray to take a job at New York's Rainbow Room. (Such was the for-

bringing her back home to her apartment on 110th Street after work." After the last show on Saturday nights, the LaSalle often brought several friends to her place in upstate New York, where she'd make breakfast. "Mabel loved to cook English things such as trifle and shepherd's pie."

Almost as well known as their joint ownership of the auto is the fact that, when it broke down on a Florida trip, Bart returned to New York by train and during the few-hour ride wrote *On The First Warm Day*. He shrugs off such an ability to write a song in next to no time by claiming it would germinate unconsciously and by the time the tune surfaced, it was virtually complete.

He is a repository of tales about the offstage carryings-on of celebrities who frequented his clubs and others, such as the diva who would offer less than favorable comments on some of the performers in her well-known powerhouse of a voice, audible throughout the room if not outside the building. If Bart were seeking a new calling, his recollections would give him ample material to be a raconteur, if not a stand-up comedian.

Bart's first jobs in New York were playing at the tonier "watering holes," as the clubs were termed, where he met and was taken under the wing of millionairess "Joe" Carstairs, a bon vivant and patroness of the arts and artists. Marlene Dietrich, a friend of Carstairs, accompanied her to the pier to greet Mabel Mercer as she arrived in New York from war-threatened Paris. At Dietrich's urging, Bart offered Mercer his composition, *If You Leave Paris*. "It was my first song performed in New York," Bart says with satisfaction, and it became but the first of many that Mabel Mercer would introduce.

The war in Europe soon involved the U.S. and Bart — young, single and eligible — was called into the Army. He was eventually transferred to England to send back newspaper stories of heroic, wounded soldiers. But the reality, Bart says, was so horrible that few stories were filed. Instead, his recollections of wartime England are mostly of seeing

Marlene Dietrich when she entertained troops in England and of playing the piano in various clubs. At one moment, lost in reminiscence, he murmurs, "I should have stayed in England. They loved me there."

As we speak of wartime days in Europe, KT knew that Bud Fowler had been an officer with the Eighth Infantry Division in Europe with an interesting war story of his own and urged him to tell it. "My claim to fame," he modestly allows in his still-detectable Texas drawl, "is that I landed with the first wave on Utah Beach at 6:00 AM on D-Day."

"Tell him about Paris," KT prompted. It seemed that Bud's rifle and heavy weapons outfit had fought its way to the outskirts of Paris, with the Germans fleeing the city before them. He was in the forward command post when his colonel announced they'd been ordered to stay out of Paris.

"We were to let the French Second Armored Division come in the next day," Bud declares wryly, "wearing new uniforms, to get photographed and all that" as the city's liberators. With but six officers left from those who had hit the beach on D-Day, the colonel proposed they not stand aside and let others usurp the credit... that "the six of us should go in first and personally 'liberate' Paris."

Using a captured German staff car that had been repainted with U.S. markings, the six surviving officers drove into the city and right down Boulevard St. Germain, becoming the first Allied troops to enter the City of Light after almost five years of occupation. With their captured car, "we buzzed all around Paris, then went back out." Bud credits their survival to the French underground not shooting up their auto because of its U.S. insignia, while the German snipers left

behind were uncertain about firing at what clearly was a German staff car.

Bart returned to New York after the war and was reunited with Carstairs and many of the others from the pre-war society he knew. He took over the piano at Spivy's Roof on 57th Street until Mabel Mercer, then appearing at Tony's, offered to double his salary to come over to be her accompanist. Mabel's inclusion of Bart's songs in her repertoire gave them great exposure to other performers and he was "forever making copies of them on a blueprint



Photo by Keith Meritz

Bart Howard with his companion Tom (Bud) Fowler at KT Sullivan's wedding in 1999.



Mabel Mercer, Bart Howard and Bobby Short in 1972.

machine" to hand out on request to anyone who might sing or record them.

When Tony's closed its doors permanently, Bart went to Celeste on 56th Street to become accompanist to Portia Nelson. KT recalls that Billy Roy, who did her Bart Howard show with her at Rainbow & Stars, told her that his first view of New York included Bart and Portia at Celeste. He also said that he remembered saying to himself, "If someday I could play like that, for an elegant lady like that, I couldn't ask for any more."

At the time, Portia was one of New York's preeminent vocalists. "She was a high soprano then," Bart exclaims, and KT, herself a soprano, interjects how well his songs work for sopranos. He agrees, mentioning that when Mabel Mercer first arrived at Le Ruban Bleu, "she also had a high voice."

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Portia became so enamored of his tunes that she recorded seventeen of them, including an entire album, *Let Me Love You: The Songs of Bart Howard*.

In 1990, Julie Wilson, KT Sullivan and William Roy joined forces to record *Bart! The Songs of Bart Howard*. On liner notes accompanying the later KT Sullivan CD, *In Other Words*, Portia is quoted recalling the clubs with "people lining up nightly behind ropes to get in. Those were the days when people wanted to listen, and we all clamored for Bart's songs." Portia adds, "I could always hold an audience with a Bart Howard song." He was a vocalist's dream, providing beautiful melodies and sensitive, memorable lyrics. Frank Sinatra telephoned him to request a new song for his 50th birthday celebration, resulting in *The Man in the Looking Glass*.

Royalties from recordings were a mainstay for many composers who earned their daily bread-and-butter at the piano. Bart's royalties started with Rosemary Clooney's recording of *On The First Warm Day*, and Lena Horne's recording of *Let Me Love You*. His real breakthrough came with Johnny Mathis' LP, *Wonderful! Wonderful!* which included three Bart Howard numbers. James Gavin reports that royalties from that album alone, not including the eight other Howard songs Mathis later recorded, brought Bart \$200,000. But if Mathis' album was the breakthrough, then Peggy Lee's presentation of *Fly Me to the Moon* on an Ed Sullivan TV show a year later was the clincher. (Bart had yielded to pressure to change the title from the lesser-recognized *In Other Words*.) The song caught fire! Bart tallies more than a thousand different recordings all over the globe. He mentions that one black female vocalist's Japanese recording of the song, "I forget her name now," earned him \$50,000 in royalties. Any wonder that, when asked his own favorite, he laughs and instantly responds *Fly Me to the Moon*?

The longest spot Bart filled began in 1951, when the volatile, eccentric and difficult Herbert Jacoby hired him to emcee the fabled Blue Angel. Kaye Ballard had termed Jacoby

"the Prince of Darkness" but Bart stayed with him and the Blue Angel for eight years. At the club, Bart was elegant, charming and ubiquitous. He emceed, played intermission piano and chased the acts to make sure they'd be on stage on time. At times, even that didn't always suffice to avoid problems. There's James Haskins' report of a well known chanteuse who suffered so from stage fright that she needed several drinks for Dutch courage before going on. At least one night, as Bart turned to walk off after introducing her, the lady slid off the piano bench and under the piano. Despite his multiple responsibilities, Bart's songwriting was moving at full speed. Many of his most successful songs were written during the Blue Angel days.

Bart reminisces on eight and a half decades. He talks about "Joe" Carstairs, his early friend and patroness. Mabel Mercer. Herbert Jacoby. Marlene Dietrich. Tom Fowler. He played and socialized with some of the most interesting people of his time. The biggest names and best-known singers of his day adopted his songs, and the royalties they earned brought him a comfortable and satisfying existence. He's been honored by his Iowa hometown celebrating Bart Howard Day, with KT Sullivan on hand to do an evening of his songs. He's seen the profession's finest vocalists devote entire albums to his work and his songs continue to be widely heard in cabarets and on the air. Eartha Kitt finds them contemporary enough to have included two of them in her recent Cafe Carlyle show. "It's because relationships don't change," he says, explaining his songs' gratifying currency, "they're always the same." He acknowledges no regrets, other than remorse that he himself wasn't a singer. Perhaps the lyrics from his *It Was Worth It*, originally written for Mabel Mercer — and one of her favorites — sums up Bart Howard's private view of his life and times rather neatly: "Oh, why should I browse through my wrinkles regretting them?" he wrote. "After all, I sure had a ball while getting them."

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