Stella Castellucci: A Life in Music

by Phillip D. Atteberry

Most students of American popular music concern themselves with the industry's luminaries—singers of hit records, composers of legendary Broadway shows, innovative instrumentalists and groundbreaking producers. And yet I have found that the most expansive insights about the music and its makers usually come from less well-known studio musicians because they view the industry through a wider, less individually-minded lens.

Interviewing Stella Castellucci proved a particular pleasure because she provided such a variety of insights. Stella's story is important for two reasons. First, she is a close observer of musical trends and personalities, and thus is able to provide interesting perceptions upon a half century of music and the people who have made it. Second, Stella's life reveals much about the importance and role of the studio musician in American popular music. These musicians—tens of thousands of them across the century—have names that few of us recognize, but they shaped the recording industry as we know it with their prodigious talents and uncompromising professionalism.

Family Background

Any discussion of Stella Castellucci's career should start with her impressive musical pedigree. Her father was born in Italy to a family of musicians. Her father, grandfather and three great-uncles were distinguished bandmasters. "My grandfather," explained Stella, "whose name was Giovanni, studied composition and orchestration with Pietro Mascagni, who wrote the opera *Cavalleria Rusticana* (1890). Mascagni was a musical innovator of his day, and my grandfather was influenced by those same tendencies."

Around the turn of the century, however, Stella's great-uncles emigrated to America while her grandfather stayed behind in Italy. "Grandfather had a comfortable life in Italy," Stella reflected, "and even though he was musically adventurous, he was not personally so. He preferred the known hazards of the Old World to the unknown hazards of a new one."

Stella's great-uncles, however, immediately found work and prosperity in America, especially her uncle Omero, who settled in Staten Island and led a municipal symphonic band for many years.

Stella Castellucci, left, as a high-school performer, and above, at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel in 1975

In 1912, Stella's father followed his uncles to the New World. "Father was a young man with lots of talent," explained Stella, "and like most young people, he wanted to spread his wings a little and see how far he could fly."

Professionally speaking, he flew a long way. He was fourteen when he landed in Boston but already possessed a notable talent on the E flat cornet and baritone horn. Living with his uncles, Stella's father attended public school and played in his Uncle Omero's Staten Island municipal band.

"Father's first big break in the music business," recalled Stella, "came when he joined John Philip Sousa's band at age seventeen. Father was brought up on all the brass instruments and could play quite a number of them proficiently, but he was a virtuoso on the baritone horn, which is what he played with Sousa. He was often featured playing operatic arias on the horn to the accompaniment of Sousa's band."

After a couple of years touring with Sousa, however, Stella's father rejoined his Uncle Omero, who by this time was touring on the Chautauqua circuit. "Father and Uncle Omero worked the Chautauqua circuit together for a number of years," Stella remembered, "and then sometime in the mid-twenties, Father made the most important career move of his life. He picked up and moved to the West Coast to become a bandmaster himself, leading the new Santa Monica Municipal Band.

"As is so often the case with people," Stella continued, "Father didn't fully understand the implications of his move at the time. Within a couple of years, talking pictures transformed Hollywood and created a huge demand for musicians. Not many years after that, sound recording studios sprang up all over California. So Father positioned himself to be in exactly the right place at exactly the right time."

The studio industry did not spring up immediately, however, and during his first years in California, Mr. Castellucci, in addition to conducting the Santa Monica Municipal Band, also became a member of the first Los Angeles Philharmonic, which was organized in the middle twenties under the direction of Otto Klemperer. Perhaps the most important event during these years, however, was Mr. Castellucci's marriage to a native born Angeleno in 1929. A year later, in 1930, Stella was born, the first of four Castellucci children.

"By the time I was born," observed Stella, "Dad was working all the time. He had as much studio work as he could do in addition to the Philharmonic." Stella's father worked for all the major film studios, and among his hundreds of film credits are *The Jazz Singer* with Al Jolson, several of the Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers musicals for RKO, and MGM's *Gone With the Wind*.

Childhood

"Of course my father was by far my most profound musical influence," Stella acknowledged when recalling her childhood, "but perhaps my first important influence was my Aunt Aggie. She wasn't really an aunt but a second cousin who had been raised by my grandmother. She was eight years older than I and much like a big sister to me. She played piano, loved popular music and, like most girls, the movies. I used to sit and listen to her play the piano for hours and, in doing so, learned lots and lots of popular standards. Aunt Aggie also took me to movie matinees nearly every weekend, and I became familiar with even more music. I loved all kinds of movies, but the musicals captivated me most. I was only a very little girl, less than ten, but I still remember being enthralled by Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers dancing on the big screen."

Stella at Ciro's nightclub in Beverly Hills in 1955

Stella began taking piano lessons when she was about five, but confesses to having been a poor student. "I wanted to play because Aunt Aggie played. But I was very young and didn't practice much, and I had a hard time with the black keys. I guess you could say that the idea of playing an instrument appealed to me more than actually playing it. I struggled with the piano off and on until I was about ten and then stopped."

But even though Stella was not dedicated to practicing as a child, she continued to listen. "We had a record player at home, and my sister and I used to listen to music, mainly when Father was at work. We listened to some classical music, some band music, and lots of popular music. But because my father played

and listened to music all day at work, he preferred not to have the record player or radio on at home. He needed a break from it, which I didn't completely understand until several years later when I experienced the same thing."

By the time Stella reached middle school, much of her listening came from radio broadcasts. "When I still attended St. Cecilia's Elementary," Stella recalled with a chuckle, "my sister and I walked home for lunch because mother insisted that we needed a hot lunch and not something out of a bag. And during lunch I always tuned in disc jockey Al Jarvis and his 'Make Believe Ballroom.' I listened to all the popular artists of the day, though my favorite was Nat Cole, who was very popular with his trio. I loved everything he did, but especially 'Straighten Up and Fly Right.' Occasionally, when mother let down her vigilance a little, I was late getting back to my one o'clock English composition class.

"Many years later, incidentally, when I was touring with Peggy Lee, it was a great thrill for me to meet Nat King Cole. We were finishing up an engagement at the Cal Vada Club in Lake Tahoe, and Nat Cole opened the following night. He came backstage after our final performance and renewed his acquaintance with Peggy and several members of the group. I did so enjoy meeting him. He did so much for American popular music, and he was a beautiful, sweet, elegant, dignified man."

Stella's father began taking her consistently to concerts when she was eleven. That is when she became fascinated with the harp. "A good part of my fascination was visual, I'm sure. The size of the harp was overwhelming compared to the other instruments, and the soaring sound of it was most impressive. Father was leading the Los Angeles County Band by this time, and his harpist was May Cambern, a wonderful musician and beautiful lady who captivated my attention. Aïda Mulieri Dagort was also his harpist."

Stella asked her father if she could take lessons on the harp, but recognizing that the instrument would likely overwhelm her as the piano had done, he suggested some training exercises first. "Father worked with me in solfège himself," explained Stella. "We worked mainly at the keyboard, and he taught me to recognize different intervals in various contexts. We worked that way for a couple of years, and it greatly sharpened my ears and my musical intuitions."

When Stella finally did begin harp lessons, her first teacher was Aïda Mulieri Dagort. "Aïda's aunt," explained Stella, "was Lucia Laraia, a wonderful harpist who worked extensively with my father in the early days of sound movies. It was Mrs. Laraia who recommended her niece as my first teacher, and I've been grateful ever since. Aïda started me on the Oberthür method, which worked to my advantage because it is not a primer for children but a well-rounded course with a fine musicality to the exercises and etudes."

Stella studied almost a year with Aïda Dagort, a short time with a studio harpist, Joseph Quintile, then, after some time off, with Mary Jane Barton, referred by Mr. Quintile. "Ms. Barton introduced me to the Salzedo method, which gave me a new way of thinking about

Stella at a recording session in 1958

the harp, though she did not impose the Salzedo hand positions on me, which I think was wise because I was quickly developing an ability to get around on the instrument. Adjusting to new hand positions might have disrupted that progress. Aïda Dagort and Mary Jane Barton had quite different teaching methods, but they both expected excellence from their students and exercised enormous common sense in their teaching. They understood that mastering an instrument is, to some degree, an individual thing, and they tried to nurture individual talent in whatever form they found it."

Stella observed that her early studies were somewhat fragmentary and disrupted because America had just entered World War II and life in general was chaotic. "Most families at that time experienced some disruption," she observed, "and ours was no different."

One of Stella's most pleasant World War II memories is of her father's leading the Los Angeles County Symphonic Band. "That band had a weekly musical program broadcast over NBC which I enjoyed," Stella reminisced, "but I remember most vividly the many concerts they played in Pershing Square in downtown Los Angeles. The band accompanied many well-known singers and movie stars who came to perform on behalf of the war bond effort. Father's regular vocalist at that time was a favorite of mine, John Raitt, who later became very well-known, but who at that time was, for me, just a handsome young man with a beautiful voice."

Stella's most serious and sustained harp studies began in 1945, when she became the pupil of Alfred Kastner. "Actually," recalled Stella, "it was May Cambern who suggested to my father that I might be ready for a teacher of Mr. Kastner's stature, and fortunately my father agreed.

"I would not want to say that one of my teachers was better than another," clarified Stella, "because they were all excellent. But I was in 10th grade by the time I started studying with Mr. Kastner, and I was a better student because I was more mature. I was still young enough to be awed, however, and I found Mr. Kastner's accomplishments to be awesome indeed. He was significantly older than my other teachers and had an international reputation. He was born in Vienna and had studied with Antonio Zamara. I remember being particularly impressed when I found out that Mr. Kastner had played the Debussy *Danses* in London with Debussy himself conducting, and he had also played in orchestras conducted by Tchaikovsky in Moscow.

"And yet Mr. Kastner was a very modest and gentle man," Stella continued. "He was not 'demanding' in the way we normally think of that word, but he made me want to work very hard—partly in order to please him, but mostly in order to feel satisfied with myself. Before I began working with Mr. Kastner, I was never much of a practicer, but during my time with him, I began practicing very seriously and hard. Perhaps that was the most important thing Mr. Kastner did for me."

When assessing her teachers, Stella makes judgments cautiously. "Clearly all of my teachers were very fine," she said. "To say that one was better than another would be inappropriate and untrue in my case, because in the end, the teacher can only be as good as the pupil. If I made more progress on the harp with Mr. Kastner, it was in part because I was an older, better pupil."

Early Professional Experiences

1948–49 was a transitional time for Stella in three ways. Not only did she graduate from high school, but Alfred Kastner, with whom she had been studying for three years, died at the age of seventy-eight. Stella herself turned eighteen and took her first job as harpist for the American Broadcasting Company Radio Orchestra.

"That job fell into my lap," recalled Stella. "I was just out of high school and looking for a direction when Kathryn Julye Gilbert called my father and suggested that I audition for the ABC job. Kathryn was a close friend and a busy harpist at CBS and NBC, but mostly at NBC, where she and her husband worked a lot with my father.

"There was a quota law at the time, limiting musicians to a certain number of radio broadcasts a week. If you exceeded that, you were in trouble with the union. Kathryn had become so busy with CBS and NBC that she could no longer work for ABC. Being a close family friend, she was aware of the progress I had been making with Mr. Kastner and encouraged me to audition. My father also thought it was a good idea, though I wasn't keen on it. I wanted to work and be independent, but I was still insecure about my abilities. I knew that studio work required lots of sight reading and very little rehearsal before the performances. I was afraid I just wouldn't be good enough.

"I did go and audition, however, and got the job. It paid $97.10 a week and seemed like a fortune to me at the time."

Stella insists that even though the job helped her develop musically, she never became comfortable with it. "We did six radio broadcasts a week and two live television shows," Stella recalled. "The orchestra's conductor was Buzz Adlam, who composed all of the cue music and wrote most of the musical variety arrangements, though there were other staff arrangers at ABC who also helped out. When I arrived at work, at one or two in the afternoon, the music was all laid out. We ran through it quickly, and then did the shows. We worked with different movie stars and singers every day—Bing Crosby, Dinah Shore, virtually every name in show business. That was exciting for me but added to the stress I felt to get things right."

Stella also enjoyed the cue music for radio dramas and comedies because it allowed her to observe so many well-known actors and actresses. "I remember Richard Crenna particularly well," she recalled. "Of course he later became well-known as a dramatic actor, but in those days he played comic juvenile parts with a great deal of humor and originality. He worked regularly

on two shows, 'A Date with Judy' and 'Corliss Archer.' Watching him work with those radio scripts, one would never have imagined his more serious dramatic abilities. I suppose one of the most satisfying parts of the job was being in a position to observe so many talented people in all facets of show business, many of them at the peak of their profession and many of them on their way up."

Stella worked almost exclusively at ABC until the middle of 1951, at which time she began freelancing and doing studio work, mostly in the recording studios and occasionally for motion pictures. Even though she didn't work regularly in the motion picture studios, one of her most treasured memories is her very first motion picture job— playing in the orchestra for Charlie Chaplin's 1951 film, *Limelight*. "Mr. Chaplin supervised every aspect of the film," explained Stella, "and he was at every single scoring session. During our first session, in fact, he directed the orchestra, coaching us mainly through the film's main title, which he wrote. The harp was positioned up front, just a little under the podium where Mr. Chaplin was conducting. It was quite nerve-wracking for me, and I was surprised at what a good conductor he was. I knew he had written some lovely music, but I was impressed at his ability to handle an orchestra."

With Peggy Lee

In 1953, while still freelancing, Stella received a call from jazz trumpeter Pete Candoli, which changed the course of her life significantly. "Pete was in the ABC orchestra while I was there," explained Stella, "though I hadn't seen much of him since I left. Then he called me out of the blue one afternoon from Peggy Lee's house. He said, 'Stella, we're rehearsing here at Peggy's, and we're going to open in a week at Ciro's [which was a posh nightclub on the Sunset Strip in Beverly Hills]. Peggy has decided she'd like to add a harp to her jazz quintet. Why don't you come over and give us a try?'

"I was quite simply astonished. I had never met Peggy Lee and never given a thought to working in a jazz group. I couldn't imagine a harp in a jazz ensemble. Or perhaps I should say I couldn't imagine *myself* in a jazz ensemble. I was familiar with Casper Reardon, of course, and Adele Girard Marsala, but the words "harp" and "Peggy Lee" just didn't seem to go together.

"And yet later, after I came to know Peggy, it all made perfect sense. Peggy Lee is a very intelligent, independent person. She wasn't solely a singer but an artist in the fullest sense of the word. She enjoyed creativity in all forms, and bringing a harp into her ensemble was another example of that. Peggy loved the harp as an instrument anyway. She had collected a number of recordings by the well-known New York harpist at the time, Laura Newell, and particularly admired her recordings of Ravel. It was that knowledge and appreciation of the instrument that gave Peggy the idea of utilizing the harp in the first place.

"Of course I didn't know any of that then, and I'm afraid I'm getting ahead of the story. I was very up front with Pete when he called. 'Pete, I just don't think I'm the person you want,' I explained. But he insisted. 'Come on and give it a try, Stella. I know how you play. I used to listen to you playing by yourself down at ABC. You know the tunes and you've got ears, so come on and give it a try.'

"In truth, Pete was right. I did used to enjoy getting off to myself and running through lots of standards. It's not that I improvised so much, except in the sense that I liked to sit and run through tunes in different ways. That's what Pete had been hearing, though I hadn't been aware of his listening, and it was true that I knew the traditional jazz repertoire.

"So I went—and felt quite inadequate indeed. I wasn't even driving at the time, so my father and I loaded up my Lyon & Healy 22 in our station wagon, and he drove me down to Peggy's house in Beverly Hills. I should also say that Father was excited for me. He loved all kinds of music. He was raised on classical music, of course, but he loved theatre music, popular music and jazz. Peggy loved him, and he knew most of the musicians from having been around the studios so much, so after I got established with Peggy, he often came to rehearsals and enjoyed listening.

"But getting back to my story, when we arrived, Peggy's housekeeper, Lillie Mae Hendricks, met us at the door. I can still see her as if it were yesterday. Lillie Mae became a life-long friend to me and my family until her death last year, and even though I can still see her opening the door that day, it is hard for me to remember that I didn't even know her and was scared to death.

"Peggy had assembled a terrific jazz group. In addition to Pete on trumpet, there was Marty Paich on piano, Joe Mondragon on bass and Frank Capp on drums. Peggy made me feel absolutely at home. She is a very natural, unpretentious person. She grabbed my hand and said, 'Hi, Stella, come on in and sit down. Listen to us for a while, and when you feel like jumping in, just jump in.'

"So I did that very thing. I remember they were playing Cole Porter's 'I've Got You Under My Skin,' and before they finished, somewhere around the bridge, I put my hands on the harp and began chording around a little."

"We played about a half hour before breaking for supper. I hadn't arrived until late afternoon, and they had been going at it for some time. Lillie Mae set out a wonderful buffet, and we all helped ourselves. I felt very much at home, though I saw Peggy making her way around the room talking to the various musicians, and I had a feeling they were discussing me—which they were. Ultimately, Peggy came over and said, 'Stella, we think this is going to work out fine, why don't you come on the road with us.'

"Of course I was pleased, but I was frightened, too. I had never been away from home. I had never worked

Happy times on the road and recording with Peggy Lee

nightclubs, and I wasn't accustomed to head arrangements. But I took the job; we practiced hard for a week, and then opened at Ciro's. Things went well, then we were off to Las Vegas, Lake Tahoe and beyond."

Stella quickly learned her role in the ensemble. "Almost immediately I understood that my role was to add an additional color to the music. I was not one of the swinging, improvising parts of the sextet. I expanded chords and added additional depth to the sound. Mostly I chorded. And Peggy loved glisses (more than I did), so I utilized the gliss periodically because clearly no instrument can come close to the sound made by a glissing harp. Only occasionally did I work bass lines, though once in a while I did, depending on the song and our approach to it. When I joined Peggy, she was not using a guitar, though she did for most of the years I toured with her. I suppose the greatest challenge musically was to make sure the guitar and harp—both primarily chording instruments—complemented each other and didn't become redundant.

"Intros and endings were also important because Peggy liked to use the guitar and harp for those, and she liked to use them for a gentle cushion beneath her dialogue between songs. For a long time, Laurindo Almeida and I used a head arrangement we worked up of David Raksin's 'Theme From the Bad and Beautiful,' also known as "Love Is for the Very Young." Laurindo, Peggy and I loved that tune, and the way we used it helped Peggy build bridges from one tune to the next."

Traveling with Peggy Lee turned out not to be as daunting as it could have been. "Peggy understood that I was young and had not traveled much," explained Stella, "so she mothered me a great deal. After we finished the initial engagement at Ciro's, we flew to Las Vegas for a couple of weeks at the old Sahara Hotel. My mother was uneasy for me, so she suggested that my sister, who had just graduated from high school, go along. Peggy was very receptive to that. Peggy arranged for a nice suite with herself, Lillie Mae, Luanna and me. After Las Vegas, we flew to Lake Tahoe, where Peggy was joined by her daughter Nicky, who must have been nine at the time, and her niece Merilee. My sister, Luanna, proved to be quite helpful as a companion to the girls during the daytime while we rehearsed, and she also watched them at night."

The more Stella traveled with Peggy Lee, the more Peggy became a big sister figure. "Peggy was a very good mother, and she had a lot of mothering impulses. She immediately recognized that I was a sheltered young girl who had come from a strict home environment, so she made sure that I was taken care of wherever we went. I never inquired about accommodations or expected anything different from the other musicians, but during all the time we traveled together, Peggy arranged for me to stay in the same suite with herself and Lillie Mae. She gave me good career advice when it came to studio work and other jobs that came along, and if we happened to be touring on Mother's Day, which we often were, I always gave her a gift. My career would never have been as satisfying and busy as it turned out to be had it not been for Peggy's guidance and encouragement."

Stella was not only influenced by Peggy Lee's musical ability and acumen, but her diverse other interests. "I think everybody knows that Peggy is a great songwriter and lyricist. But most people don't know how enormously creative she is. As a lyricist, she works fast and unerringly. I've seen her work up good lyrics on the spot—at rehearsals or backstage. She has an amazing ability to throw her whole concentration into a creative project. That talent came, in part, I think, because of her deep interest in the humanities. People who only know the public side of Peggy Lee tend to think of an attractive, physical blonde in front of a big band or on stage in a nightclub, but that was largely public relations. In truth, she is an extremely spiritual person and has always had a vast library in her home on many diverse subjects, but especially the philosophies of various cultures and religions. She is a voracious reader, and I'm sure that had something to do with her being so good with words.

"But she also has a deep interest in sculpture, painting and interior design. She does particularly good sculptures of hands. Her work is so natural looking, with every tendon and vein produced in exact detail. And ever since I have known her, her oil paintings and sketches have been displayed all over her house. In fact, her paintings were included in the Franklin Mint Gallery of American Art Exhibition that took place in the Lincoln Center in 1973.

"People who knew Peggy marveled at how many talents she had and how she found time to pursue them all and become so proficient in them," continued Stella, "but I think the key to Peggy's success was that she maintained a balanced life. She toured two or three months out of the year, and did some recordings and occasional motion pictures, but she always gave herself long periods of time at home, and those rejuvenated her. She took great pride in her home. She did all the interior decorating herself; she had a large garden and did the gardening herself. She loved the earth. And she also loved to cook. She was one of the best cooks I've ever known, so innovative and tasteful (though please ignore that unintended pun). I have always enjoyed cooking also, so that is an interest that we shared and enjoyed together.

"It's amazing how the littlest things stick with you through the years—Peggy had a wonderful recipe for lima beans that I just loved. They were made with sour cream, dill and I can't remember what all, but I loved the recipe and admired its originality. One night back stage, Peggy—as she always did—went to each of her musicians and gave them a kiss and a good luck hug, and when she came over to give me a hug, I said, "Good luck, Peg, and I love those lima beans." She laughed and said, "Yes, 'lima beans,' that will be our thing," so before and after every show, she would take my hand and say, 'lima beans.' Peggy had a nice way about her like that. She was always concerned about her musicians. During those long nights in Las Vegas, when we did three shows a night, the 2:00 A.M. show was dreadful. It was so hard to stay sharp and keep going at that hour, but Peggy would go around to each of us, give us hugs, do our 'lima bean' thing, just to keep us going and let us know she appreciated our efforts."

Stella went on to explain that during her years with Peggy Lee, the traveling was cyclical. "We really only traveled about three months out of the year. The tour varied some every year. Occasionally we got to the East Coast, but our most consistent stops were in Beverly Hills, the Sands at Las Vegas, various spots around Lake Tahoe, and the Fairmont in San Francisco, usually doing a couple of weeks in each place. I liked Las Vegas least because I didn't adapt very well to the lifestyle. My favorite place was the Fairmont in San Francisco. I loved San Francisco because it is such a cosmopolitan city, and I loved the Fairmont because it was such a beautiful, beautiful turn of the century hotel. We played in a showroom called the Venetian Room, and it was very elegant and beautiful, and very European looking. And we stayed in the Fairmont itself, which was quite luxurious. It was a stop I looked forward to every year."

Stella's most precious musical memory came during the summer of 1953, the year she joined Peggy Lee. "Peggy was the artist for the closing concert of the Hollywood Bowl that season," she explained. "Victor Young was her conductor, and even though he is best known for his wonderful film scores, he worked a lot with Peggy, and in fact they wrote some songs together. The great thrill for me was that Peggy's group was accompanied by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, of which my father was a member. He played bass trombone. So we were both on the stage of the Hollywood Bowl performing with musical legends. I will always remember that night fondly."

Stella went on to mention that her father retired from the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 1962 because of the mandatory retirement age of sixty-five. "But my father wasn't ready to retire," explained Stella, "and he was invited to join the Honolulu Symphony, under the direction of Robert La Marchina. They were thrilled to get a person of my father's experience and ability, and

he was thrilled to be able to continue working. He played for them eight seasons before retiring, and it made him very happy."

Beyond Peggy Lee

Though touring with Peggy Lee changed Stella's life significantly, her increased studio work, thanks largely to Marty Paich, changed it even more. "Even though I met Marty through Peggy," explained Stella, "he didn't stay with her long because he was making such a name for himself as an arranger and conductor. It seemed like overnight he was everywhere in the studios. Because he and I had played together for Peggy, he called me every time he needed a harpist, which was virtually all the time."

Stella worked with Marty Paich on a variety of different projects, including albums featuring Mel Torme, Jack Jones, and Sammy Davis Jr. "To be truthful," admitted Stella, "I worked on hundreds of Marty's dates over the years, and I simply can't remember which dates I worked on and which I didn't."

But Stella also worked with a variety of other arrangers including Gordon Jenkins, Nelson Riddle, Don Costa, Billy May and Russ Garcia, whom she remembers fondly. "I worked with Russ Garcia on the Ella Fitzgerald/Louis Armstrong *Porgy and Bess* album. It was a wonderful experience working with those two legendary jazz performers, but I also enjoyed Russ's arrangements. They ran a wide gamut from symphonic to very jazz oriented. It was a hugely satisfying week of recording." Among other memorable dates, Stella recalls working with Nelson Riddle on the Rosemary Clooney television show, and how she especially enjoyed the verbal acrobatics of the singing Hi-Lo's; she also remembers vividly working with Gordon Jenkins for a live Judy Garland concert, and with Billy May for Peggy Lee's 1960 Christmas album for Capital Records.

Though Stella is reluctant to rank the arrangers she has worked for, she speaks insightfully about the craft. "All good arrangers have similar strengths," she observed. "First, they can all handle people. They know how to get the most out of their musicians. Usually that means having a low-key approach at the recording date. Marty and Nelson Riddle and Russ Garcia were all very low-key in their style. Even Billy May, who was more extroverted by nature, was not so at recording sessions. I never worked that much with him, but I knew him socially because he and his wife were frequently at Peggy's, and I found him to be a thoroughly sweet man."

"Second," continued Stella, "all good arrangers and conductors can work in a variety of styles and with widely varied instrumentation. I always enjoyed more lushly harmonic, symphonically oriented arrangements. Gordon Jenkins, Nelson Riddle and Russ Garcia, of course, are known for such arrangements, but even the more swing-oriented arrangers like Marty and Billy May were capable of beautifully lush work. Equally gifted in lush, symphonic orchestration is Johnny Mandel, composer of the very beautiful Academy Award-winning song, "The Shadow of Your Smile" from the film, *The Sandpipers*. His, too, is an extemely low-key, very quiet, and sweet personality, really the most quiet of all of them, and very modest. His orchestrations backing the fine jazz singer and pianist Shirley Horn speak eloquently of his gifts.

"On the subject of symphonic-oriented arrangers, Michael Amorosi is the only harpist I know, or am aware of, who is also an orchestrator-arranger-composer. I once heard him play an arrangement for harp in which he actually inflected what he was playing with the sound of a French horn. He has a thorough knowledge of orchestration and scoring.

"Finally," Stella concluded, "all good arrangers know how and when to stay in the background. A common failing of a flawed arrangement is that it tries to do too much at the wrong times. The great arrangers know how not to over-arrange."

One of Stella's more interesting studio dates was on Peggy Lee's mid-fifties Capitol album, *The Man I Love*, which featured arrangements by Nelson Riddle but was conducted by Frank Sinatra. "I was a bobby soxer in the early 40's when the Sinatra craze swept the nation," recalled Stella, "and I was as mad about Frank Sinatra as all the girls my age were. And even though I had long grown out of that by the middle fifties, still, it was exciting to do a date with Frank Sinatra. I was most surprised at how good a conductor he was. Of course it is well known that Frank Sinatra, like Bing Crosby and many singers, did not read music to any great degree. And Frank Sinatra's tempestuous life and temper were well documented by the press. He didn't seem to be the sort of person who would make a good conductor. And yet he was. His demeanor was very mild and business-like, and he handled the baton very capably, giving cues and reflecting nuances just as though he conducted orchestras all the time."

Stella stopped traveling with Peggy Lee in 1960. "My years with Peggy were very rewarding, and we traveled comfortably together, but by 1960, I was busier in the studios than I ever imagined I would be. Marty had gotten me started, and I still worked with him a lot, but in that line of work, one job leads to another. By 1960, I was working regularly with Motown. I was on a lot of the early Jackson 5 and Supremes recordings. I was working regularly on the Ray Conniff albums, of which there were quite a number, doing a lot with Jose Feliciano—just more jobs than I can recall. I was also beginning to work restaurants. I played for a couple of years with a string group at the Beverly Hilton, and I did similar jobs at the Beverly Wilshire. I became busy doing that at night and working the studios during the day. It was all rewarding, but traveling two or three months out of the year didn't fit into my career anymore. Peggy and I continued to be good friends, however, and we continued to work together regularly. We made a record together in 1955, just vocal and harp, called *Sea Shells*. Peggy was still with Decca, and the

Stella at the Bel Air Hotel in California, 1968.

album was her idea. It's all sea chants, folk songs and children's play songs. Peggy always thought it was ahead of its time, and it probably was, but the album stayed in print for over twenty years, and now it's been re-released on CD.

"Incidentally, now that I'm thinking about *Sea Shells*, I had an interesting thing happen to me in the early 1970's. I was playing in the Hollywood Bowl orchestra behind a very young Rod McKuen, whom, of course, I did not know at all. And he came up to me after a rehearsal and said, 'You're Stella Castellucci aren't you?' I verified that I was, and he said, 'I particularly asked for you to be in the orchestra for my concert because before I ever came into the business, I derived a lot of inspiration from listening to you and Peggy on *Sea Shells*.' I appreciated that immensely. It's always nice to learn that someone has listened to your work and gotten something from it."

In 1973, Stella's career took on an added dimension when she collaborated with Verlye Mills on the book, *Rhythm for Harp*. "Verlye was a studio harpist," explained Stella, "and that's how I became acquainted with her, though she started in New York with radio. I used to call her the Charlie Parker of the harp because she could play so fast and rip roaring—and perfectly clean. I never heard anyone play as fast as she could. She was quite amazing playing Chopin piano works on the harp, especially some of the rapid ones. Anyway, we got together on a book about rhythm possibilities for the harp. We provided many examples of jazz, Latin and other types of rhythm. We also covered jazz harmony in quite a bit of detail. It was very interesting, hard work, but we enjoyed it, and as a result of that book, we gave a workshop for jazz harp the following summer at Mount Saint Mary's College here in Los Angeles. We gave a two week workshop and used the book as our text. We had a class of about twenty people who came from several different states. It was our first experience teaching in a workshop, and I thoroughly truly enjoyed it. I met such lovely people, a few of whom I still hear from."

In 1980, Stella began working on another book, this time by herself, called *An Approach to Jazz and Popular Music for Harp*. "I worked on that book for two and a half years," recalled Stella, "maybe more. I began it some time in 1980 and finished it some time in 1983. "I

Penny Howk Beavers, Stella, and Erzsébet Gaál

started with between forty and fifty standard tunes, just lead sheets, and from those I produced arrangements for harp, making sure I provided lots of examples of the various jazz styles. I also included some jazz history and discographies, and some biographical information of jazz instrumentalists and singers. It was a major undertaking. I have a feeling that most people who tackle books don't realize the amount of work that's involved. Of course that book was particularly slow to emerge because I had to get permission from a variety of publishers to use the lead sheets. That takes time. It was hearteningly well received, however, and is still in print. Lyon and Healy and Vanderbilt have it, so I'm grateful."

When asked about her favorite songwriters, Stella professed a great love for all those who produced the great American standards, and hesitated to single out some for fear of slighting others, but ultimately she did speak with considerable insight on the topic. "For originality, I admire the songs of Harold Arlen, Hoagy Carmichael, and Alec Wilder. Their imaginations often take them beyond the standard boundaries of the popular American tune, allowing them to handle a bridge differently or vary a phrase at an unexpected time. I suppose one could say that they are idiosyncratic, but that implies 'weird' or 'quirky,' and they aren't that at all. I admire their work because it is so persistently—and insistently—fresh."

For sheer beauty, Stella prefers the music of Rodgers and Hart. "Richard Rodgers had such an innate feel for structure and balance," observed Stella, "that his tunes have a natural, unassuming elegance. Of course I don't mean to suggest that there is anything wrong with Rodgers and Hammerstein, but I think Richard Rodgers' best songs were written with Lorenz Hart. Hart is often known for his wit and sarcasm, but he had a tender, poignant side too, which brought out the best in Rodgers, as in 'My Romance' or 'I Could Write a Book.' As wonderful as Rodgers and Hammerstein were, they were both so polished and professional that they lost that air of simple innocence that the early Rodgers and Hart tunes sometimes achieved.

"But one's taste for songwriters is always changing—and sometimes changes from day to day. Just because I haven't mentioned Jerome Kern, George Gershwin, Cole Porter or Irving Berlin doesn't mean that I think less of them. I admire Jule Styne and Stephen Sondheim. I love and am grateful to all those who helped create the Great American Songbook."

Stella is equally insightful, though cautiously humble, about addressing changes in American popular music over the last several decades and in particular the decline of the popular American standards. "I am certainly not an expert on such topics," she insisted, "I can only provide a couple of observations. First, songs do not become standards over night. Many songs lie around in composers' trunks for years and are recycled several times before they become appreciated. We assume that standards aren't being written like they used to be, but perhaps future students of popular music will find more in our music than we, ourselves, have found in it.

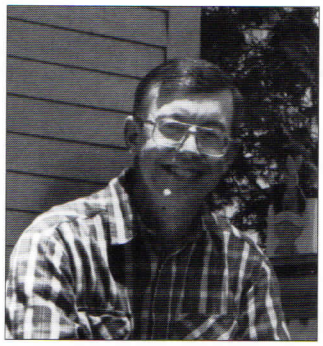
"Having said that, however, I must admit that I do not find the popular American song to be as appealing today as it was earlier in the century. For the most part, it does not have the same grace, wit and elegance. It would take a smarter person than I to explain why that is. I suspect it has something to do with the highly technological world we live in. Perhaps the more dependent we become on technology, the more we lose the fine edges of our consciousness. I don't mean to sound like I'm opposed to progress. I am grateful for it. I have a computer that I'm learning more about every day, and I am grateful for e-mail (though I'm not very good at it) and medical advances and all the rest of it, but everything comes with a price. Perhaps the more we let technology do for us, the more we risk having our sensitivities and sensibilities dulled—and perhaps that has an effect on the art we produce.

"But, my goodness, I am sounding philosophical. I truly don't know why the Golden Age of American popular music has passed, but I sense that, for the moment at least, it has."

Stella continues to work regularly, not as much as she used to, but as much as she wants. "I have had a busy career, and I am grateful for that. But I also have many other interests that I have never fully pursued. Since I was a young girl, I have loved to cook. I have also loved to crochet and do needlepoint. Obviously, those activities don't fit very well into the lifestyle of a

musician. I am enjoying those other interests more now than I ever have before. I also love to read, but I've never read as much as I wanted to. I have always had a particular interest in history, especially ancient Egyptology and archaeology, and I'm reading more now than I have in the past. One of the many things I learned from Peggy Lee is that a variety of interests gives one balance in life, and that leads to longevity."

About the Author



Phil Atteberry teaches English and jazz history at the University of Pittsburgh at Titusville. In addition, he frequently teaches summer seminars on jazz artists at the Chautauqua Institute in New York State.

He received his Ph.D. in English from Washington University in St. Louis. When not teaching or depleting his bank account buying CD's, he writes feature articles and book reviews for *The Mississippi Rag, CODA Mazazine* and *Cadence*.