

# The Aura of Deanna Durbin

BY ED KNAPP

In a small French village 35 miles outside Paris sits a lovely ivy-covered farmhouse. The rustic structure typifies an old world look, encircled by a high wall brick fence. Inside the picturesque dwelling sit an elderly couple seated about an oaken table in a moment of respite, each with a cup of steaming tea.

The early morning sunlight spills over through lattice-lined windows coloring everything in the room with a warm honey glow. The couple, caught in dappled sunlight and shadow patterns speak to one another in rapid French dialogue. Their muted voices barely break the silence of their quiet surroundings.

MM. and Mme. Charles David stationed in the light flooded kitchen of their cheerful home are discussing plans for an occasioned trip to London. They seem to be planning a timely visit to catch a traveling exhibit of classic European paintings to be on display at the National Gallery at Trafalgar Square.

The typically dressed French couple married nearly fifty years have shared a common bond of interest in the rich cultures of the world. In their retirement years they have found time to consume the fruitful rewards bestowed on them with the study of art, plays and music.

On multifarious occasions they have

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*Edwin S. Knapp of Three Rivers, Michigan is a long-time fan of Deanna Durbin and a retired professional photographer who spends his free time writing and collecting.*

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traveled every corner of Europe's continent, the British United Kingdom and the United States in that gratifying quest.

The passing of the years have deepened soft character lines in the bespectacled face of MM. David facing his wife across the table — casting her a pixie-like glance from warm eyes that twinkle. Mme. David's cool blue eyes reflect his gaze as she looks up, her eyes meeting his in shared understanding.

We become aware of a change in the subject of their conversation as the modulated level of their French terms rise in pitch. That private word exchange becomes increasingly jubilant. They are now discussing an up coming visit from their son, Peter. Peter David, a skilled physician, is flying from the States where he holds practice, to be with them.

The couple look forward to their son's infrequent visits with elan. Mme. David particularly looks forward to Peter's sojourn, since he is also an excellent pianist. When at this home of his birth, Peter delights in accompanying his mother on the parlor piano as her lilting voice is raised in song.

Considerable time has passed since they last had this most welcome reunion to allow them another delightful family, private, living room concert.

Charles, always marveling at his wife's notes of bell tone clarity, is also pleased and he is certain to hear some of his favorite French ballads.

This warm gathering gives Mme. David a much desired opportunity to exercise her

full vocal range and she enjoys sharing her God-given gift of song with her family. She welcomes the accelerated lift it brings.

There was a time over a half-century ago when, as Deanna Durbin, her extraordinary vocal talents were shared with the world, enriching the lives of the multitudes who gloried in her beautiful soprano notes.

The aura of D. D. (as her studio co-workers affectionately called her) began early with her birth on December 4, 1921.

She was the second child born to Ada and James Durbin. She was born in Winnipeg, Canada and named Edna May.

The Durbin family moved to Southern California's warmer climate in 1922 when Edna May was but one year old. She was a happy child and would often be found singing to herself during playtimes. Her older sister Edith recognized the singular quality of Edna May's rare voice and was instrumental to insisting that her younger sister receive valuable music training as she grew.

Edna May had a God-given gift in a lovely voice that was exceptionally mature for her youthful years.

While still in her teens, Edna May appeared frequently in school programs in

which she usually had a singing part. At one such recital, Jack Sherrill, a Hollywood talent agent, happened to stop by. He often stepped into out of the way places neglected by many scouts in his search for

new and unusual talent. Sherrill, with a keen eye and ear for hidden ability, was there when Edna May sang a recital number. Immediately he noted her excellent vocal range and winsome way with a song.

Seizing on her future potential, he approached Edna May and her mother with an offer to be in the movies. The fourteen year old girl was overwhelmed with the glamorous

vision of becoming a movie star as if it were a dream come true.

In 1936 Edna May made her first screen appearance in an M-G-M film short entitled *Every Sunday*. She co-starred with another new singing juvenile, Judy Garland.

That now historical reel of film caused no waves of interest for either girl at the time and was soon forgotten.

Several months later her promotional-minded agent, Jack Sherrill, approached Universal Studios representing his new discovery. Universal was experience some hard times, but the casting office, well





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aware of Sherill's remarkable ability to foster star material, gave Edna May a screen test that resulted in signing her to a movie contract.

Among the studio's first strategies was to replace her first name with one that had more star-like quality and, after much discussion, selected "Deanna."

Almost at once the studio placed Deanna Durbin in a low budget film, *Three Smart Girls*. During production of this 1936 film, the flower of her beautiful voice, pretty appearance and wholesome manner encouraged director Henry Koster to increase her part.

Deanna was given an "introductory" star billing in this, her very first feature film — a giant step for any potential star.

While she was making the film, her marvelous singing voice and sparkling personality came to the attention of Eddie Can-

tor, famous comedian of the *Ziegfeld Follies*. Cantor was always on the lookout for key talent to inject into his popular radio show sponsored by Texaco. The first night she appeared on Cantor's program he introduced her by saying, "With open arms you'll greet her. There's no one any sweeter than delicious, delightful, delovely Deanna Durbin."

Deanna's exposure on that highly rated half-hour program brought rave responses from professionals, critics and thousands of regular listeners. Her network appearances became a windfall of advance publicity for *Three Smart Girls*.

Charmed radio listeners flocked to see Deanna when her film was released to the nation's theatres, giving Universal Pictures a box-office income of over two million dollars, an astronomical figure in those days when adult tickets were priced at twenty-five cents.

Universal had a gold mine in their new star and she was able to put the faltering studio's ledger back into the black. From that time forward, D. D.'s career rose through starring roles in twenty other feature films. Over the next decade she averaged two blockbuster movies a year.

Producer Joe Pasternak worked with Deanna on her first and many other Durbin films. The Pasternak—Koster team created a whole series of magic formula pictures with their new star. They painstakingly wrapped each of Deanna's films in a fairy tale charisma that theatre audiences took to their hearts. Pasternak related that Deanna Durbin never showed wild moods or flashes of temperament so common to most successful stars on studio pro-



DEANNA DURBIN, age 13, with Eddie Cantor on his *Texaco Town* program (1936).



## DEANNA DURBIN

Scenes from her sensational motion picture successes

Upper left—*100 Men and a Girl*  
 Center, above—*Mod About Music*  
 Upper right—*Three Smart Girls*  
 Lower left and center—*Three Smart Girls*  
 Gals Grow Up  
 Lower right—*Three Smart Girls*

FIRST LOVE

INSIDE COVER of 78 rpm Decca record album of Deanna Durbin songs from her Universal Studio movie hits (1940).

duction sets.

*Three Smart Girls* was nominated for Best Picture of the Year by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, but it lost out to *The Great Ziegfeld*.

In 1937, her second starring feature *One Hundred Men and a Girl* was nominated for Best Musical Score and Deanna was happy when Universal's music department won the Oscar.

Over the years, many songs made popular by Deanna's enchanting soprano earned Academy Award nominations and, in 1938, the Academy recognized Deanna Durbin for "significant contributions in bringing to the screen the spirit and personification of youth." She received a miniature Oscar for her wholesome performances.

Deanna's extraordinary articulation had Metropolitan Opera tenor Lawrence Tibbett praising her as a "modern day Jenny Lind."

She was equally comfortable with a popular song or serious music that extolled the purity of musical tone and clarity that was amazing.

Her name soon became a watchword among her following of dedicated fans. The D. D. appellation was used to endorse a large number of consumer products such as facial soap, chewing gum, ladies wear, laundry flakes, and many other everyday items.

The Durbin name was used to promote an entire line of new products, reaching the youth market. There were Deanna Durbin



dolls, books, paper dolls, sheet music, long hair ribbons, dress wear, coloring books, and other assorted output.

She became a popular recording artist and recorded exclusively for Decca Records, producing five 78-r.p.m. "souvenir" albums and dozens of popular singles.

Deanna was asked to place her hand and foot prints in the forecourt of Grauman's Chinese Theatre and was awarded Silver Screen Magazine's Gold Medal Award.

In 1938 the Film Critics Award recognized her role in *That Certain Age* as "best performance of the month by a cinema actress."

She rated front page headlines and an exciting picture spread in *Life Magazine* when she received her first screen kiss from handsome newcomer Robert Stack in the 1939 film *First Love*.

Studio heads preferred to keep the maturing Deanna in light-hearted, "Cinderella" parts, not wanting to tamper with proven box office formulas. Much to her chagrin, her roles were eternally sweet and youthful.

Silent screen star Mary Pickford's screen roles had her playing children's parts when she was a married adult in real life. But Deanna overcame this problem in 1944 when she insisted upon breaking that mold and appeared in a straight dramatic role in *Christmas Holiday*, sharing star billing with a relatively unknown Gene Kelly. Acting the part of a torchy night club performer, Deanna sang only two songs. Until then, her starring vehicles usually featured at least four songs by Deanna. *Christmas Holiday* received mixed reviews from her faithful fans, but admirer Walter Winchell gave her "orchids" for her performance.

During World War II, Deanna devoted considerable time and talent to the war ef-

fort. She made regular appearances at the Hollywood Canteen, entertaining and catering to servicemen. She appeared on Armed Forces Radio's *Mail Call* and *Command Performance* broadcasts and made frequent visits to stateside military bases.

Recently she recalled those days. "I remember being hoisted up on the back of a GI truck where I sang without musical accompaniment to a bunch of boys who were going overseas." She described the bitter-sweet experience as "Wonderful, exciting and fun — though sad at times."

In the 1943 film *Hers to Hold* she introduced the wartime song "Say a Prayer for the Boys Over There." It was nominated for an Academy Award.

Deanna Durbin had two unsuccessful marriages between 1941 and 1948. Both ended in divorce but her screen personality remained untarnished. Her first marriage to Vaughn Paul was childless. She became the proud mother of two children, born to her and second husband Felix Jackson. Her son Peter was born in 1951 as a result of her successful third marriage to French film director Charles David (pronounced *Day-veed*). She met him when he directed her 1945 comedy who-done-it, *Lady on a Train*.

Much of Deanna Durbin's continuing screen triumphs could be attributed not only to her singing and personality, but to the image on the screen created by her cameraman.

Those motion picture portraits of her flawless oval face, rich auburn hair, startling blue eyes, her full mouth and dazzling white teeth were divinely photographed by ace studio cameraman Joe Valentine. He filmed her every alluring feature in the full-screen close-ups that made love to mesmerized theatre audiences.

In 1945 and 1947 she became the highest paid female movie star in the country. During ten years of movie-making, Deanna



**ONE HUNDRED MEN AND A GIRL (1937)**  
Deanna Durbin stars with Leopold Stokowski

earned over two million dollars, much of which was invested wisely.

But in 1948, after her film *For the Love of Mary*, while she was still a top attraction, she abruptly chose to retire from the screen, coincidental with the end of her contract at Universal Pictures. She decided to seek some privacy in a life that had not known any privacy since childhood.

Leaving Tinsel Town, she sailed for Europe and rented an apartment in Paris, where she had the opportunity to live a quiet, carefree life, far removed from the glitz of spotlights, pressures, and the hustle and bustle of the make-believe world.

In Europe she became reacquainted with her former film director Charles David and

they were married December 21, 1950. The couple, finding many common interests, have lived in relatively private seclusion in a slow-paced French village with less than 1,700 inhabitants.

In their retirement years they have traveled, seeking cultural refinements and recreation. Deanna occasionally returns to the United States, attending to business matters in the country of her former screen triumphs. She makes her Stateside journeys in total anonymity.

Mme. David refuses to grant interviews and has declined all offers to re-enter professional life. She continues to utilize the enchanting voice that has grown richer and fuller with her maturing years, but it is heard only in the privacy of that little French farmhouse.

The Davids continue to live a life of fulfillment,

charm and togetherness in their 48 years as loving man and wife. When they married they entered into a mutual pact that is as strong today as the day it was vowed. As Deanna has related, "My husband agreed that he would protect me from spiders, mosquitoes and reporters, and my job is to protect him from lions, tigers and dinosaurs."

In her shield of guarded privacy, Deanna Durbin David expresses this feeling: "Let the magic of the young Durbin image perform while the not-so-young Durbin enjoys a happy, peaceful, obscure life." ■

(NOTE-- Tune in to TWTD July 25 for a four-hour salute to Deanna Durbin.)