

RUTH WALLIS: RETURN OF THE SAUCY CHANTEUSE

By Chuck Miller

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It's 1965 at a small supper club in Lake Tahoe. A lady takes the stage, sitting down at the piano. A trio of musicians behind her - a drummer, a violinist, a trumpeter - prepare for the first number. The lady begins playing the keys. The show begins. "Loretta's a sweater girl now... Loretta's a better girl now... How does she steal away each fellow's heart? She's got two outstanding reasons... she's cute and she's smart," she sings.

Many of the patrons have purchased copies of her most recent albums, even though they had to scour three or four record stores for the discs. Not because they were rare, mind you. She continues her show, singing about an Italian man who wanted nothing more than a little *pizza* every night. Or a Russian man who polished his *samovar* while his girlfriend waited all night. With a wink of an eye and a flighty giggle, Ruth Wallis had another audience's attention.

Throughout the 1950's and 1960's, Ruth Wallis was the queen of the risqué records - less blatant than Rusty Warren, more eye-appealing than Belle Barth. "I've collected Ruth Wallis material for about 10 years now," said Darcy McCrea, a Wallis fan from Alberta. "If you get into period pieces of the 60's, you pick up a Rusty Warren or Woody Woodbury record, but those songs get dated real fast. Ruth's songs are just so timeless. Those classic tunes are just incredible. And the fact that she pulled it off as a woman, running her own independent company, writing her own music. And she's still doing that today."

Even today, the saucy chanteuse still writes and produces music, this time for the Broadway stage. Novelty music fans to kitsch collectors hunt the record shows and flea markets for her music. A revue of her most famous songs, *Boobs*, is in pre-production for the Los Angeles theater circuit.

Not bad for a woman whose songs were never played on top 40 radio.

Ruth Wallis was born in Brooklyn, either during the Roaring 20's or the Depression-era 1930's - she wouldn't give her age, simply saying with a wink of an eye, "The year has since passed."

After high school, the teenager sang in both the Isham Jones and Benny Goodman orchestras. "I had one week with Benny Goodman," said Wallis, "but he said I was a soloist, not a vocalist." From there, she toured around the country with other orchestras, slowly building her own stage presence and confidence. By the early 1940's, she joined the cocktail lounge circuit, where she sat at a piano and sang for the dining customers. Sometimes she would perform at the hotel lounges from city to city, finally settling down for a time at Boston's Latin Quarter.

It was there she met Hy Pastman. He was the manager of the Latin Quarter, and a two-week engagement later became a three-week engagement, then a diamond ring engagement, then marriage.

Ruth continued to tour after she and Hy were married, returning to the Latin Quarter for some shows. The patrons liked Ruth's songs, especially the torch ballads she wrote herself. They especially went wild over some songs Ruth inserted into the show - novelty songs with a smidgeon of double-entendre - singing about how Johnny had a yo-yo that he played with all day long, or about Freddy the fisherman's son, and how long his fishing pole was. "There were times when the audience was very funny," she said, "and while they were laughing at me, I was laughing at them."

Soon fans asked Ruth where they could purchase her songs. "I was performing songs like 'She's Got Freckles On Her *But She Is Nice*.' And somebody said to me, 'Gee Ruth, why don't you try to follow that up with a song of your own?'

"So I wrote 'Johnny Had A Yo-Yo.' I sat at the piano and the words would come to me and the music would come to me. I always figured it all related back to an ancestor who was an Italian satirical writer. I was told many years later that I had an ancestor like that in Italy - I never knew his real name, but I guess I got my writing ability from him."

But the large record companies at the time - RCA, Columbia, Decca - were not interested in performers with ribald, sexy double-entendre lyrics. No station would play those records on the radio, for fear of losing their FCC license. Most record stores wouldn't stock them. The few record companies that did produce such records were small labels like DeLuxe or Jubilee, companies who could keep the overhead low and the output high.

Ruth Wallis originally signed with DeLuxe Records, a Newark, New Jersey-based company. She released some 45's and 78 rpm box sets with the company, including a song that would become her trademark - "The Dinghy Song" (DeLuxe 1183, re-released as Wallis Original 2019). The song told of Davey, a man with "the cutest little



dinghy in the Navy," and it sold a quarter of a million copies. It even spawned three recorded sequels - "Davy's Dinghy," "The Admiral's Daughter" and "The New Dinghy Song" - all written by Wallis.



By 1952, Ruth and Hi decided it was time to form their own record company. "The director of DeLuxe, Joe Liebowitz, became a family friend. We formed Wallis Original Records, and he actually became half-partner. It was our own company - my husband and Joe were the bosses."

Wallis Original started releasing 10-inch LP's containing a mixture of previously-recorded material, standards from her Latin Quarter shows, and newly recorded pieces. Wallis sang and played the piano on these discs, with musical accompaniment from New York's best studio musicians, such as the Ray Charles Singers and the Mac Ceppos Orchestra. "On the recordings, we had musicians from big orchestras, who were willing to do outside jobs and recording sessions," said Wallis. "We had some of the finest musicians who got a kick out of doing the stuff, because it was away from their usual pattern. Jimmy Carroll was a very big director and conductor, and he did all the orchestrations, a very talented man. He brought

in all the musicians from the big bands, saying, 'Let's go do a session with Ruth Wallis, it'll be fun.' We recorded in New York. When I did my calypso albums, we had a lot of fun. The fellas got such a kick out of that kind of music, it wasn't the kind they were accustomed to playing. I had to attempt to have an accent to record lyrics like, 'Down in the Indies / They don't wear undies / Except on Sundays / Because Sunday is a day of rest,' and songs with titles like, 'The Gay Young Lad from Trinidad.'"

One of Ruth's biggest non-saucy records was recorded in 1953. Arthur Godfrey was an early television pioneer and talk show host, while singer Julius LaRosa was a regular performer on the program. LaRosa began to draw more fan letters than Godfrey, and on October 1953, Godfrey fired LaRosa from his show, claiming that the loyal singer "had lost his humility."

That "humility" comment became the basis for "Dear Mr. Godfrey" (Monarch 3005), where Wallis skewered the pompous television host.

"Dear Mr. Godfrey
Listen to my plea
Hire me and fire me
And make a star of me..."

Recently, when A&E produced a *Biography* episode about Arthur Godfrey, Ruth's song "Dear Mr. Godfrey" was heard as background music, one of the few times a Wallis tune has made it to the television airwaves.

A few years later, Ruth was tempted to rewrite the hit, this time as a letter to Liberace. "I started to write a song for Liberace, he was a wonderful person. He was going to get married at the time, and I couldn't fathom it. So I started writing what was going to be a takeoff on 'Dear Mr. Godfrey,' it was going to go something like, 'Dear Liberace, don't marry that darn girl.' I never went through with it, because his manager had a little disagreement with me on that. I could understand that now - Lee couldn't have married that girl anyway. But Lee was a lovely person."

Liberace wasn't the only famous person Ruth Wallis encountered on her tours. During an early 1960's lounge club engagement in New Orleans, Wallis performed "(Mama Always Told Us) Bring The Boys To The House," a blistering satire of the often-married Gabor sisters. "I was working in New Orleans at the Monteleone Hotel, and at that time Zsa Zsa was engaged to the mayor or the governor of New Orleans, I can't remember which. He was in the audience during my show, and after I got through with that number, he came up to me and said to me, 'Ruth, you really shouldn't do that number when you're here in New Orleans.'"

Six months later, she was in Miami at another show. Figuring she



was far enough away from New Orleans and anybody Zsa Zsa Gabor was engaged to, she performed "Bring The Boys To The House" again. "After the show, the Gabor sisters' mother came backstage to meet me. She was in the audience, I didn't know that. And she told me, in that Hungarian accent, 'Darling, oh you are so deliciously dirty.' She was very charming. I was flattered."

In 1964, she was the featured performer at the Fountainbleu Hotel in Miami, when some other guests of the hotel were causing a stir among the staff. "The Beatles had just come over from England, and I was working at the Fountainbleu Hotel for Lou Walters, who was Barbara Walters' father. He was the head of the entertainment, and he booked me there. My children went to see the Beatles, so I let them. I didn't have the time. I'm sure John Lennon wasn't interested at the time in hearing me sing about the cutest little dinghy in the navy."

Ruth didn't have time for the Beatles or anybody else. She was releasing two albums a year, alternating albums of saucy material with torch ballad albums with coy titles like *Love Is For The Birds* and *Torrid Love Songs Of Men And Memories*. "I always had one ballad in the middle of the show, and at the end I would sing a song called, 'This Is The Only Life I Know,' about a performer who didn't have much of a life, and when she was going to get older, what was going to happen. It was a sad song. And people couldn't get over the fact that I closed on that show. They would tell me, 'Oh I feel so sorry for you,' and I told them, 'Don't feel sorry for me. My family's waiting for me at the other end of the building.'"

But she had to watch as her best novelty songs were covered by artists like Rusty Warren and Belle Barth, singers whose humor was more vulgar than Wallis ever imagined. "Belle Barth would come up to me and say, 'I do your songs much better than you do.' And I don't know why - I never did the stuff crudely. There was no point to it. But the words spoke for themselves. It was never a matter of portraying sex. And Belle Barth couldn't exude sex. I simply said to her, 'Thank you.' What am I going to say to her, 'No you don't?'"

"I went on to accomplish so much more than they did. When Stan Irwin came to hire me for the Sahara, I was working in Tahoe in the early 60's, and he came up to see me and he said, 'Ruth, I want to hire you to come in and work the lounges.'"

"I said, 'Lounges?'"

"He said, 'Ruth, if you don't take this thing, I'm going to hire Rusty Warren.'"

"At the time, I wasn't aware she was doing my songs. I said, 'Don't worry Stan, I'll be there.'"

She even had to contend with a soundalike named Ruth Wallace. "We stopped her from issuing her album. I was always working, I was busy recording, my husband and Joe took care of the business. I cashed the royalty checks."

Meanwhile, Pastman and Liebowitz were trying to find record stores that would stock Wallis Original records. "Since the day I recorded 'Johnny Had a Yo-Yo,' my music was banned in Boston. I had a lot of stories in the newspapers, 'Ruth Wallis is Banned in Boston.' The radio stations wouldn't play my stuff, they said forget it. I could perform at the Latin Quarter and the Bradford Hotel in Boston, but I couldn't hear my songs on the radio. Because I was 'Banned in Boston,' that's what brought people in to hear me."

But Pastman and Liebowitz did find an outlet for the records - in Canada, in England, in France - anywhere where the broadcasting standards were less restrictive. So while Ruth was making an adequate living on the supper club circuit, her albums became huge sellers in foreign countries. In London and Toronto, in Hong Kong and in Paris, record stores couldn't stock Ruth Wallis records fast enough.

It was while she was expecting her second child that she received a phone call from Johnny Franz, a British record company president. Franz wanted Wallis to come to England and record an album. "When I got to London, I worked the big hotel rooms there, playing my songs to such large crowds. It was like coming out of the shadows into the sunshine. In the recording studio at the record company, the pianist said to me, 'Ruth, it's been a pleasure playing your songs, I've accompanied so many singers doing your songs.' I never played the very big theaters in America. It wasn't until I went overseas that they booked me into these terrific rooms and places. They weren't



lounges - they were big nightclubs."

By the mid-1960's, Ruth Wallis appeared in Australia for a two-week engagement at a Sydney nightclub. It was to be the first of seven Australian tours over a ten-year period, and Ruth and Hy brought their two children, Ronnie and Alan, for a family vacation Down Under. But as she disembarked from the plane at Sydney's Mascot Airport, customs agents seized eighteen copies of "Hot Songs For Cool Knights" from her arms. They would not let the albums enter the country - and if Wallis wasn't careful, they would not let *her* into the country, either.

The customs agents brought Wallis into a room and questioned her for an hour about her music. She told the Australian newspapers that there should have been no reason why her records should be banned from an entire continent. "There is definitely nothing obscene or salacious about any of my songs," she told a *Variety* reporter at the time. "I'll fight this ridiculous ban to the very limit. How can they ban my records when they haven't even heard them?"

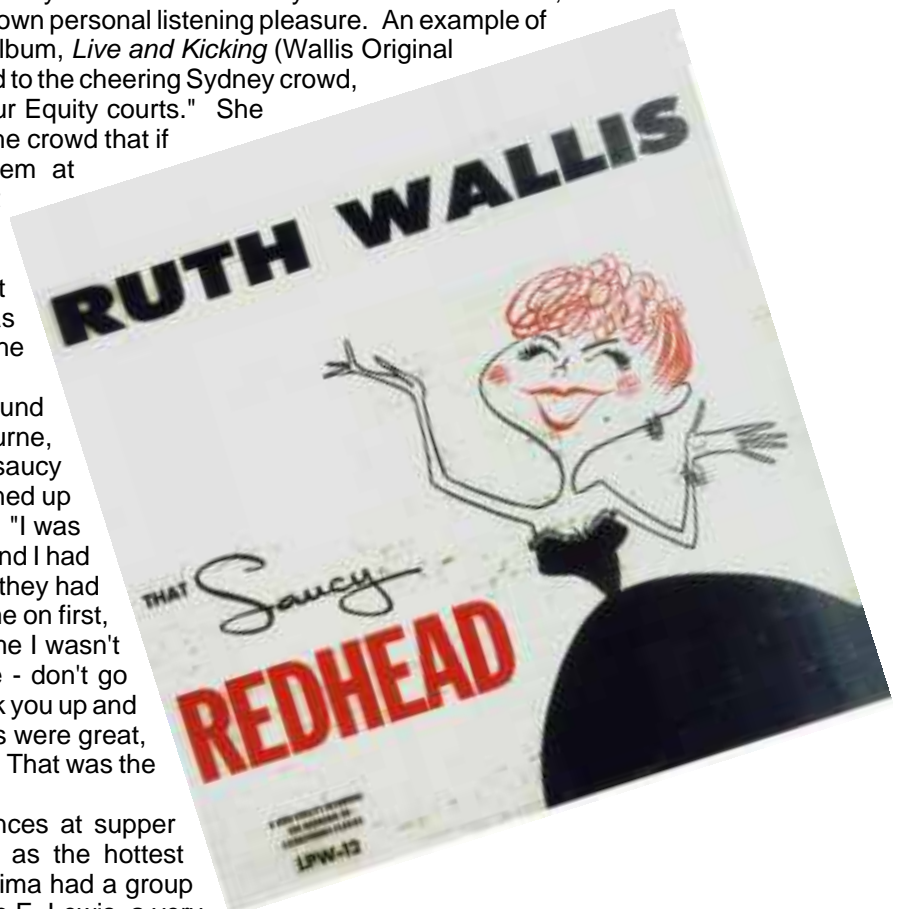
Finally the records were returned to Wallis and she was allowed to perform. The songs still couldn't be heard on Australian radio ... but if you knew somebody who knew somebody who had connections, a well-heeled Aussie could nab a couple of discs for his own personal listening pleasure. An example of the brouhaha can be heard on Wallis' concert album, *Live and Kicking* (Wallis Original WLP 19). "I've been on your talk shows," she said to the cheering Sydney crowd, "I've been on your television shows - and in your Equity courts." She joked about her confiscated albums, informing the crowd that if they wanted copies, they could purchase them at Mascot Airport. "I got a lot of publicity on that trip," she recalls today. "I did tremendous business, I played twice after that on that tour in the hotels there. The Aussies were just wonderful for me. When I went to Australia, I was on all the talk shows. They finally let me have the records back."

During the 1960's, Wallis performed around the world - San Francisco, Hong Kong, Melbourne, Johannesburg, London - and although her saucy songs were never heard on the radio, fans still lined up at concert halls and nightclubs to hear her sing. "I was hired to perform in Honolulu, at an Army base. And I had a couple of shows to do there. Unknown to me, they had also hired a bevy of strippers. The strippers came on first, and then I came on. After my show, they told me I wasn't risqué enough. The promoter had to warn me - don't go home with any of the soldiers, have someone pick you up and take you home. The strippers thought my songs were great, but the soldiers didn't think I was risqué enough. That was the first time I performed with strippers."

In America, Wallis still made appearances at supper clubs and lounges, playing the same venues as the hottest comedians and bandleaders around. "Louis Prima had a group that played in the lounge when I performed. Joe E. Lewis, a very famous comedian, also played the lounges. I followed Lenny Bruce in a little club in Los Angeles. What a filthy little mouth he had. My audience was wonderful. Anybody got out of line, made a rude comment to me, I'd tell them, 'Go wait in the car.'"

Yet as her career was reaching its peak, Ruth spent so much time writing and performing that her two children - daughter Ronnie and son Alan - were drifting away. "We were living in Boston, but I was never home. I always had a housekeeper, my parents - and Hy's parents - were there all the time. My husband was there some of the time, but he went with me to Australia as my manager. I never tackled business, my husband and Joe Liebowitz ran the business. I would sit myself in the corner with a pad of paper and a pen and start writing. My children would say, 'Mom, mom,' and I would say, 'Please don't bother me, I'm writing.' It happens with children - my son understands now - what went on before. My daughter always thought I loved my son Alan more than I loved her. And consequently, they had not been getting on for years.

"A while back, I wrote to my granddaughter Melissa. In the letter, I told her I was not much of a conversationalist, because I've never spoken much. I didn't have many friends when I was going to high school, I sat in a corner when I was home and just kept on writing songs. At the end of the letter, I asked Melissa if she would let her mother read it. So when my daughter Ronnie read it, she understood that it wasn't that I didn't love them any



less. I just didn't have enough time to love them more."

So in the early 1970's, Wallis retired from performing, giving her final concert in Australia.

Today, Wallis splits her time between an apartment in London and a ranch house in eastern Connecticut that she shares with her son Alan and two cats, Bonnie and Clyde. Hy Pastman, her husband and manager, passed away in 1987, and Ruth still recalls the great memories and time they spent together. A framed picture of them sits in their morning room, adjacent to an abstract painting commemorating Ruth's career - even a little painted dinghy tucked away in the corner of the canvas.

She has turned her focus toward writing movie scripts and Broadway shows. Some of the musical scores she has created - "Once Upon Atlantis," "Prinny," "Mama Was A Star" - have received positive feedback, and all are in various stages of preparation for Broadway production. Wallis wrote all the songs for the shows, eschewing her previous salacious material for a more articulate twist of the lyric.

"*Once Upon Atlantis* takes place in the Hotel Atlantis, off the coast of Florida. And it's about a young British novelist and her aunt Jess, who come over to the island to do some research on Atlantis. And in the course of time, she meets with the strange Zizabooty from the other end of the island, a mysterious multimillionaire, and it floats back to the days when she was a goddess in Atlantis, and he was just a fella. It goes back and forth between the past and the present."

"*Prinny* is based on King George IV of England, when he was the Prince of Wales, and he had to marry a German princess, Caroline, because they needed money. And he had a few ladies on the side, which is very prevalent today, even in London. Barbra Streisand's sister wanted to play the part of Caroline, but she got tired of waiting for the money to come in."

"And *Mama Was A Star* was about a star who had been married at least twice, and was getting unhappy, getting a little older, and her daughter, who really didn't love her too much, her daughter also wanted to be in show business, and about the romance she had with an older producer. And about the kids at that age. It takes place in the 50's or the 40's, I can't remember that part. Robert Goulet heard one of the songs from that show, 'All the Clowns Are Not In the Circus,' and he loved it. He told me he wanted to perform that one himself."

Lately, Ruth Wallis records have been rediscovered by a new audience. Tunes like "The Dinghy Song" and "Johnny Had A Yo-Yo" finally found a radio home on the Dr. Demento show. Wallis appeared with Dr. Demento on one of his broadcasts, and fielded some questions from the listening audience.

And for fans who missed Ruth Wallis' songs, she is preparing a cabaret show called *Boobs*, a revue of her best material, headlined by British cabaret performer Ruby Venezuela. "*Boobs* would be the 'Happy-Gay-Lucky' review. We would have some very fine female impersonators, plus one real live girl, and with some staging and costumes. This would incorporate many of my old hits. It would be like a showpiece from *La Cage Aux Folles*."

A cassette of Wallis' most famous songs was released in England last year, but Wallis doesn't think very much of it. Even today, she still cares about how her songs are performed and aired. And every year, she still receives a tidy royalty from her songs, with ASCAP statements coming in from Italy, England and France. "A performer in Miami wanted my songs, but he thought he had the right to do anything he wanted with the songs - he really didn't. And at that time I thought I had a manager in London. I had one, but he wasn't worth tuppence. And what he did was - he put this cassette out - took the artwork from one of my old album covers - and he didn't even bother to remaster the tape. The balance was all off. I took the tape away from him. I get letters from young people who found my old records, and they want to know where they can get the rest of them. We're trying to find somebody who can put the records out again. Somehow I thought the music would be passe now, but it's not and I'm flattered. I started out being a writer, and I ended up being a writer, because of these musicals. The scripts and the music and the words. I came full circle."

Was there one song that Ruth Wallis liked among all the saucy, ribald material she recorded? Was there one classic she would most like to be remembered for?

"My favorite song - the one I'm most proud of - is 'My Children Are My Treasure.' You've never heard that. And the audience never heard that. That was one I wrote specifically for my children, when they were very young. And I only performed it for them."

