

## CHAPTER 24

### The Parmas: 90 Years of Jingles

Judy Parma has been in the jingle business since 1957, her husband Tom Parma since '58. They worked for all the major jingle companies and are now at JAM Creative Productions in Dallas. Tom sells; Judy sings and writes vocal adaptations.

How they managed to make their mutual love affair with jingles last so long is a testament to their perseverance and talent.

#### **Judy, you have a phone call...**

Tom was studying architecture at the University of Oklahoma, but Dallas was his home. A blind date in 1958 put him together with Judy Mansfield, who was singing jingles for PAMS and Futursonic in a primitive recording studio owned by "Pop" Sellers. The studio was in the same building as Gordon McLendon's KLIF(AM). That early vocal group consisted of Mansfield, Mary Jo and Harrold Grogan, Tinker Rautenberg and Bob Seibert.

"Judy was in a vocal session when I called from my dorm at O.U. to propose marriage," said Tom. "They actually stopped the session for Judy to take the call. I fumbled asking the question, but she said yes."

Tom knew he wanted to marry Judy, but he started having doubts about a career in architecture. "I knew I wasn't going to be another Frank Lloyd Wright," he said.

After they married, his first job was editing "Calendar Girl" master tapes at Futursonic. This was an elaborate package that involved singing days and dates for each month of the year.

Judy was doing well singing, and they were able to afford their first house. Because she was working during the day and Tom edited at night, they didn't see much of each other for a while.

Futursonic aimed for the best. Its later vocal group included Judy, Brian Beck, Jerry Whitman, Libba Weeks, Charlie Thompson, Jackie Dickson, Jodie Lyons and Ronny Tutt, who later became Elvis Presley's drummer. The studio was in a two-room wooden building in the parking lot behind the office. Over the years, those same offices housed CRC and TM Productions, but the studio eventually became a storage shed.

"There was a cancer clinic across the parking lot from the studio run by a medical quack, and a lot of people died there," Tom said. "Judy and I would see bodies hauled out from time to time."

Later that office housed the abortion clinic that gained notoriety during the “Roe vs. Wade” Supreme Court case.

### **Making music together**

You might have heard the 72-cut Futursonic package called “Variety Fair,” which used a calliope on a few cuts.

“Jim Wells, Futursonic’s president, hired a guy from the circus and had him bring a steam-powered calliope over on the back of a truck one afternoon,” said Tom. “It was a stormy day when he fired it up, and we knew we wouldn’t have a lot of time before the storm blew in. We set up some microphones, and Judy climbed up on that thing in the parking lot and played some logos just before the storm turned the sky completely black.”

Even though Futursonic came up with excellent jingles, the firm didn’t last long.

“We fell behind in getting checks to some of the musicians, and the union was demanding immediate payment,” Tom said. “We were waiting to get cash from our client stations because we just didn’t have the money. If we had been given more time to pay, Futursonic might still be around.”

The final days were grim. Along with Jim Wells, Tom and Judy were the last employees in the building.

“A client called and wanted to know where his jingles were,” Parma said. “We were sitting on a couch while Jim took the call. He told the guy, ‘I tell you what; we’re going bankrupt, how does that grab you?’ He was pretty frustrated with the musicians’ union.”

Futursonic’s tapes were sold at auction in the parking lot, but the Parmas couldn’t bear to watch.

They were out of work, but not for long. Judy went to CRC; Tom went to work at Sellers Recording Studio. They later took staff positions at the Peter Frank Organization (PFO).

### **PAMS and beyond**

Eventually Tom and Judy ended up at PAMS, where he continued to edit while she sang.

“Dick McGrew was chief engineer, and he locked the door to Control Room A,” said Tom. “He had the only key. There was always something secret about it. Knowing how to turn on the equipment was his job security.”

Bruce Collier was another engineer at PAMS who often manned the controls while Parma handled the Sonovox. Dan Alexander and Tommy Loy were others who “Sonovoxed.”

(Collier and the Sonovox are profiled in “The Jingle Book.”)

“I also did some of those crazy ‘Yosemite Sam’ cuts on PAM Series 29,” said Parma. That particular jingle called for the vocalist to imitate the Warner Bros. cartoon character. “Tommy Loy got tired of ruining his voice on them and said, ‘Here, kid, you do this. It’s tearing up my vocal chords.’”

There were a number of colorful characters in the jingle industry; Tom and Judy knew them all.

“There was a writer, Phil Kelly, who had an old convertible,” said Tom. “He couldn’t get the top to go up or down. The seats got soaked every time it rained, and one day he discovered mushrooms growing in the back seat.”

The late Frank Bloebaum was a singer/salesman at PAMS. Parma related one of many stories about the man, this one an encounter with the law.

“A policeman stopped Frank for something on Maple Avenue, and Frank got ugly with the cop,” Parma said. “The officer threatened to haul him in, and Frank asked him, ‘Can you haul me in for what I’m thinking?’ The policeman said he could not. Then Frank said, ‘Well, I think you are a son of a bitch.’”

Bloebaum drove an old red Cadillac Eldorado convertible. One rainy day the top wouldn’t go up (a common problem at PAMS, apparently); Tom saw Frank driving to a vocal session with an umbrella in one hand.

“Frank would party or play jazz clubs late into the night, and didn’t want to be late for work at the studio,” said Parma, “so he would sleep in his car in our parking lot with his bare feet sticking out the window.”

There are many stories about Bill Meeks, president of PAMS, but few about how he named his packages. Series 32 (“Swiszle”) came out late in 1966 and it was remembered for being the first package on which the Moog Synthesizer was used.

“That ‘Swiszle’ was the dumbest concept ever, but Meeks needed a package name and got the idea when we were having lunch at the Tropicana restaurant, where he had a mixed drink with a swizzle stick,” said Parma. “We thought he had lost his mind for wanting to use that term for a jingle package.”

Meeks had a nastier side, as Tom found after leaving PAMS, a period when he produced homemade Sonovox cuts to earn a few extra dollars.

One day a warrant officer knocked on Parma’s door to serve legal papers.

“Bill Meeks found out I made a set of Sonovox units, and he

wanted me to cease and desist,” said Parma. “I was just a kid back then, and it scared the crap out of me.

“I did some research and found out that Bell Laboratories developed this technology for people who had cancer of the larynx. I realized that Meeks didn’t have the right to sue me over the Sonovox technology. I told him so, and that was that.”

### **Moving to TM**

The Parmas had their own company for a while, Totalsound. They bought the equipment from the ashes of CRC, including Ampex recorders, a mixing board, echo chambers and a great collection of microphones.

“Unfortunately Judy and I formed Totalsound with a friend,” said Parma. “He didn’t know jack about jingles, and I didn’t know anything about sales. We were making a few sales, but weren’t showing much profit.

“Later, I found out that while he was supposed to be selling, he was spending our profits on his scuba-diving habit. He was flying to various islands to scuba, and milking us dry.”

About this time, 1969, Tom Merriman and Jim Long were forming TM Productions.

“Jim and I would see each other out our mutual office back doors, and Jim became a mentor to me,” said Parma. “He has the highest IQ of anyone I know. He could see that starting our new company was tough on Judy and me, and said that if I ever got tired of that and wanted to get out, I should let him know.

“A few weeks later I told him, ‘I’m tired of that!’”

Long put Tom Parma to work at his fledgling company as a salesman.

“Before we moved into the new building on Regal Row, Jim Long told me that I had the personality to become a salesman,” said Parma. “He said all I had to do was be honest, answer the customers’ questions and not worry about anything.”

Parma ended up sketching out the plans for offices in the new building. It was an empty warehouse where Pepper Tanner had had a studio. Tom sold jingles and worked on some of Jim’s automated programming concepts. Judy was the lead singer in the vocal group.

The atmosphere in the first building was informal, but when TM moved to Regal Row, Jim wanted everyone to look smart.

“He took me and the other guys to an upscale men’s shop and told the salesman to fix us up,” said Parma. “Of course, it was a time when fashions were a little different. We had long hair, plat-

form shoes, plaid suits that looked as though they were made of horse blankets and weird Nehru jackets.”

Long created TM thinking that the company eventually would be sold for a healthy profit. He told his employees to hold onto their stock because one day it would be worth something.

“And he was right,” said Parma. “Jim Long and Tom Merriman became millionaires, and Judy and I became thousand-aires!”

### **The Wonder of it all**

Tom got a call at TM one day from Stevie Wonder.

“When they told me he was on the phone, I thought it was a goofy program director playing a joke on me,” Parma said.

Parma was still producing Sonovox cuts in his living room for about \$50 each, which brought a few extra dinners for the Parma family. Wonder had heard some of those cuts on WWRL(AM) in New York and tracked Parma down to see if he could order Sonovox units of his own.

“I made him the prettiest set I ever built, and Stevie suggested I bring them to New York and teach him how to use them,” said Parma. “Whoa, that was the chance of a lifetime. So Judy and I visited him at Electric Ladyland Studio, where Jimi Hendrix used to record. We later met Stevie in California several times, and he paid for our trips.

“He is a very happy guy. He and his blind friends used to play hide-and-seek in plainly lit rooms. Amazing.”

Wonder used the Sonovox on “Ebony Eyes” on the album “Songs in the Key of Life.”

“We stayed in touch,” said Parma. “He would call me and sing or play a new song for me to see if a white guy could relate to it, so I became a sort of song advisor to him.”

For legal reasons Parma couldn’t use the Sonovox name, so he rechristened it “Z-Articulator” for the purposes of album credits.

Eventually Parma quit TM and formed Parma Productions. Tom and Judy wanted to use a lyric line from the Wonder song “Sir Duke” for the title of the company’s first jingle package. Wonder happily granted permission. The package: “You Can Feel It All Over.”

A framed platinum disc of “Songs in the Key of Life” has a prominent spot in Tom and Judy’s home.

### **Jamming**

Judy has been at JAM Creative Productions since 1985; Tom

joined JAM in 1988.

“We love it here,” he said. President Jon Wolfert “is the nicest guy in the world, very smart, very loyal.”

Parma knows that the jingle business has changed, but enjoys it anyway.

“It took a little of the fun out of it when people started researching radio and jingles to death,” he said. “You don’t have the freedom to be as creative as in the early days.

“One thing that hasn’t changed is the quality of the people in the jingle business. They are definitely unique and a cut above.”

Tom and Judy are still making jingles. Judy has been singing continuously for 46 years. I don’t think anyone keeps official records on this sort of thing, but her longevity may qualify her for the Guinness World Records as the woman heard more often around the world than any other.

The Parmas have a son, David; a daughter, Jennifer; and six grandchildren.

And yes, Tom Parma has done the math. Between him and his wife, they really do have 90 years of jingle experience.