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Preface

A found object (one of many found, in childhood):

A TV script, 1952.

The show: *Star Of The Family*, on CBS. Its hosts—Peter Lind Hayes and Mary Healy.

The show, seen Thursday nights, was sponsored by Ronson, the cigarette lighter company.

The program's guests were from show business, yet the show also featured interviews with members of their families.

In June of 1952, my parents both appeared on the program.

Ronson, the world's greatest lighter,

the announcer said, the evening of their appearance,

Presents the brightest show of the year.

“Star Of The Family”, featuring

The exciting young singer . . . Sue Bennett!

The world's biggest comedian . . . Jack E. Leonard!

The Ink Spots . . . with Bill Kenny!

And starring Peter Lind Hayes and Mary Healy!

My mother, Jack E. Leonard, and Bill Kenny were introduced in a comedy sketch featuring Peter Lind Hayes.

Later, my father was interviewed about my mother. That year, she was singing on the TV show *Your Hit Parade*, on NBC.

The script says Mary Healy gave my father a Ronson Pocket Lighter (“It’s a beauty!” he said), and they then discussed my mother’s career. My father described how she had performed in a Broadway revue, and then began singing on television. “Sue is one of the very few performers to have worked almost exclusively in television, isn’t she?” Mary Healy asked. “Yes, Mary,” my father said.

She started on Kay Kyser’s College of Musical Knowledge, then went on to the John Conte Show, the Freddy Martin Show, and is currently featured as a permanent member of the *Hit Parade* cast.

Afterwards, my mother appeared in a comedy sketch with Peter Lind Hayes. She then sang a song with the program’s orchestra.

NBC, two days later—the last *Hit Parade* telecast of the 1951-52 season. A TV columnist wrote:

Winding up a season of clever ideas in presenting the top tunes of the nation each week, “Your Hit Parade” has planned the most spectacular show of all tonight . . .

The show—to be broadcast not from its regular studio, but from a new ocean liner, the *S.S. United States*. Its maiden voyage, to England, was five days away.

That night, the show’s singers and dancers appeared from various parts of the ship. My mother sang the song “I’m Yours” (#3 that week on the *Hit Parade* survey), from the ship’s wheelhouse.

The fall of 2000, Philadelphia.

High above ground, on the *S.S. United States*.

The ocean liner, silent, in its berth on the Delaware River.

The ship—in disrepair, decay, yet still majestic. It ceased carrying passengers in 1969. In the 1980s and 1990s, it was stripped of much its insides. It was towed to the Philadelphia waterfront in 1996.

The ship—tremendous in size, the largest ocean liner ever built in America (at 990+ feet, more than one hundred feet longer than the Titanic). It is still considered one of the most legendary of American vessels. In 1999, a foundation devoted to the ship's preservation succeeded in having it listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

In 2000, the ship (for sale, at the time) was shown to me by a representative of the owner, a New Jersey businessman. Throughout the ship—vacant, dark, cavernous—light streamed in, through portholes, windows, doorways. In many areas of the ship, we needed flashlights, to be able to see. Inside, apprehending its emptiness, its outlines, you had a sense of what the ship was once like. Now, though, you had to fill in the spaces. The ship, to a large degree, had to be imagined.

Which is not dissimilar, really, to journeying through a past you did not experience firsthand. Part of the journey is, necessarily, one of the imagination.

Making such a journey also resembles this: focusing upon, contemplating, a target. Aiming, certainly, at the target's center. (Though focusing, too, upon the facets of the periphery, and their relationship to the center.)

And, of course, there was an actual target, on the *Hit Parade*—a large Lucky Strike target. At the beginning of each show the target's

bull's-eye was lifted up, revealing singer Dorothy Collins, who had been standing behind it. You now looked at Collins, through this window. Or perhaps, in its circularity, it was not unlike a porthole.

From the vantage point of decades later: you look at the target—look through the window, the porthole—trying to grasp, bring into view, some sense of the past.

The end of 1948—my mother's first appearance on television, as television itself was beginning. She sang, as a guest, on a CBS-TV program. Yet her TV career really began in 1949.

She performed on TV in New York for four years.

During this time: she starred on Kay Kyser's show (with Ish Kabibble, Michael Douglas, and others), and was featured on *Your Hit Parade* (with vocalists Dorothy Collins, Snooky Lanson, Eileen Wilson, and Russell Arms). She sang regularly on *The Freddy Martin Show* (featuring Merv Griffin) and on *John Conte's Little Show*. She also made guest appearances on other programs, such as *The Paul Winchell and Jerry Mahoney Show*, and *The Earl Wrightson Show*.

In 1951, while appearing on the *Hit Parade*, a columnist for *Downbeat* magazine wrote that she was "one of the coming female singers in the country." He wrote:

[She] has the big hearty vibrato and gutty attack
of a Garland, the controlled musicianship of a
Stafford, and the jazz ideas of a Vaughan.

She sang on the *Hit Parade* until the end of the 1951-52 season. During the summer of 1952, before the program returned for the fall season, cast changes were made, affecting singer Eileen Wilson, and my mother. Walter Winchell, referring to the show's Lucky

Strike slogan—“Be Happy, Go Lucky!”—wrote:

June Valli inherits Eileen Wilson’s star thrush assignment on “Your Hit Parade” Aug. 30th. Another who will not be “happy-go-lucky” (on that teevy date) will be Sue Bennett . . .

In the fall of 1952, she sang on a local weekday TV show in New York, starring comedian Morey Amsterdam, and featuring musician Milton DeLugg. Then, at the end of 1952, my father’s medical residency ended, and he was offered work in Boston. At the start of 1953, as Harry Truman departed the White House, and Dwight Eisenhower became President, my parents left New York. My mother’s career on television in New York was over.

And so, a demarcation. In 1953 my father’s medical career began in Boston. My mother sang with an orchestra on a morning radio show (this fact—that a local radio show featured a live orchestra each morning—is to me striking). My brother was born later that year. In 1954 and 1955: her own Boston TV program, *The Sue Bennett Show*. A 1954 newspaper story, titled “She Chose Love,” recalled how she had left behind her New York career. In 1956, the year I was born, she was co-host of a weekday morning television program, with another Boston TV personality, cowboy Rex Trailer; she played piano, sang, and introduced movies. She was then for three years, until 1961, host of a weekly TV movie program.

In the 1960s, she sang, off and on, on local television shows. Yet she appeared as a singer less often—and in the 1960s began a new career as a voice-over performer, largely for television and radio commercials; it was a career which lasted for decades.

During the 1960s, however, there were occasional appearances on national TV shows.

“The Merv Griffith Show” [sic], Tuesday,
 (Ch. 4 at 2) will have Boston favorite
 Sue Bennett, former *Hit Parade* star and
 TV hostess, among its guests.

said a 1963 newspaper story. Several times during the 1960s she sang on Mike Douglas’s TV show; during these appearances the two reminisced about Kay Kyser’s TV show, and the records they made together with Kay Kyser’s orchestra. For one appearance, Douglas’s introduction noted that years before she had

just turned her back on show business. But she’s a
 delightful talent, and here’s my old duet partner
 from New York . . .

My mother had therefore had two professional lives: a life in the national realm, and her life that as a child I knew of firsthand, as a local TV and radio personality. The former life, years after the fact, received periodic attention—in newspaper stories, in conversations on television. In childhood, it drew my attention as well. Throughout my life, indeed, the various fragments of my mother’s past—the names, images, sounds from this era (really, two intersecting eras—the start of television, and the end of the big band period)—have meant much to me. These particular fragments—television and musical fragments, across time—have been (by my own volition) a part of my own life, shadow-like, for as long as I can recall.

Chapter I:

The Dumont Network

My mother's names:

Born Suzanne Benjamin; known professionally, until the end of 1949, as Sue Benjamin.

Her married name, as of Aug. 1949: Suzanne Fielding.

Then, at the end of 1949, when she joined Kay Kyser's show: Sue Bennett.

October, 1948, until January, 1949 (as Sue Benjamin)—she had a singing role in a Broadway musical comedy revue, *Small Wonder*. The play featured Tom Ewell, who later starred with Marilyn Monroe in the film *The Seven Year Itch*.

At the end of the summer, she had graduated from Syracuse University, where she studied English, and considered a career in journalism. Yet during school she also sang regularly with an orchestra, and on a daily radio show. She also performed in theatre at the school, appearing in *Girl Crazy*, with fellow student Jerry Stiller.

After an audition, she was hired for *Small Wonder*. She was twenty years old.

Also on Broadway at the time: *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and *Mister Roberts*. In four months, *Death Of A Salesman* would appear.

In addition to her role in *Small Wonder*, she was understudy to three of the play's stars: Mary McCarty, Marilyn Day, and Alice Pearce. (Pearce—famous for portraying Mrs. Kravitz, the neighbor on television's *Bewitched*, in the 1960s.) For one *Small Wonder* performance, she substituted for Pearce, who had taken ill.

(Other performers in the revue included Jack Cassidy, Joan Diener, and James Kirkwood. Kirkwood later became a novelist and playwright; he co-authored the book for the musical *A Chorus Line*. George Axelrod, one of the writers for *Small Wonder*, later wrote the play *The Seven Year Itch*, which like the subsequent film starred Tom Ewell. The director of *Small Wonder*, Burt Shevelove, later co-authored the book for *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*.)

In late 1948, because of *Small Wonder*, she was asked to sing on a CBS-TV show, *Places, Please*. *Places, Please* was a showcase program for performers who were not well known. Barry Wood, the show's host, had been a popular singer in the 1930s and '40s. For a time he led his own orchestra, and as a singer starred on radio's *Lucky Strike Hit Parade*. *Places, Please* was fifteen minutes long, as were many TV programs of the time. My mother sang on *Places, Please*—it was her first television appearance—and soon afterwards appeared on it again.

Small Wonder ended at the beginning of 1949. An actress from the play, Virginia Oswald, had begun singing on *The Stan Shaw Show*, a weekday program on the Dumont Network, TV's fourth network. For several years, in the 1930s and '40s, Shaw hosted a popular all-night music show, *The Milkman's Matinee*, on a New York radio station. His TV program, Virginia Oswald told my mother, had an opening for another singer. She auditioned for the job, by appearing on the program—and then began singing on the show every morning.