



Allen, Peter (1944-1992)

by Tina Gianoulis

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Campy and flamboyant, Peter Allen was the supreme gay performer, a song and dance man with flash, romance, and a sense of humor about himself. A lifelong entertainer and award winning song writer, Allen won fame first as Judy Garland's protégé and Liza Minnelli's husband, then as a semi-closeted gay artist whose scandalous affairs were whispered loudly around the entertainment world.

Although some critics sneered that Allen's success was due less to talent than to his relentless self-promotion, his rapid decline and death from AIDS in 1992 cut short a career that had been as irrepressible as Allen himself.

The Australian Allen was born Peter Allen Woolnough in Tenterfield, New South Wales. When he was still a child, his father committed suicide, leaving Allen, his mother, and his sister to fend for themselves. Allen was a natural extrovert and took to the stage early, earning extra money for the family by singing in local pubs as early as age twelve. In 1959, he sought his fortune in the big city, moving to Sydney, where he met singer Chris Ball. Together they formed the popular Allen Brothers and sang rock and roll on television and in clubs around Australia and abroad.

On one of these tours in 1964, while performing at the Hong Kong Hilton's Starlight Room, Allen met Judy Garland, who was attending the show with husband Mark Herron. Garland hired Allen's group to open for her, thus pushing Peter Allen further into the international limelight. Allen became close to Garland and her family. He married Garland's daughter Liza Minnelli in 1967 (they were divorced in 1970), and he had a relationship with Herron, Garland's soon-to-be-ex-husband.

After moving to the United States, Allen developed a campy cabaret act and pursued a fertile career as a songwriter. He wrote songs for fellow Australians Olivia Newton-John and Helen Reddy, including Newton-John's chart-topping hit "I Honestly Love You" (1974). He won a Grammy and an Oscar for his 1981 collaboration with Burt Bacharach, Christopher Cross, and Carole Bayer Sager on "Arthur's Theme" ("Best That You Can Do").

Allen also collaborated with Carole Bayer Sager on well-received tunes for Rita Coolidge and Melissa Manchester, as well as a touching tribute to Judy Garland called "Quiet Please, There's a Lady on the Stage" (1980). He teamed up with Australian songwriter Angry Anderson in 1979 to write the energetic rhythms of "I Go to Rio," which became his signature song.

But Allen was not content to remain behind the pen. His career was prolific and varied, even frenetic. During the 1980s, he performed to packed houses at Radio City Music Hall and created a long-running autobiographical musical titled "Up in One--More than a Concert." He remained popular in Australia; his "I Still Call Australia Home" (1972) has long been the advertising theme for Qantas Airways.

In 1988, he collaborated with Harvey Fierstein and Charles Suppon to create the ambitious Broadway musical flop "Legs Diamond." Despite his disappointment at the musical's spectacular failure, Allen could

not be defeated. At his last concert in Sydney, in January, 1992, he sang, danced, and clowned before sold-out audiences.

While he was in Australia for that concert, Allen was bothered by a nagging sore throat. Trips to the doctor revealed that the pain in his throat was caused by Kaposi's sarcoma, an AIDS-related cancer. Allen died just five months later, on June 18, 1992, of AIDS-related complications.

Although his sexual orientation was widely known or suspected in the entertainment and gay communities, Allen was never publicly out as a gay man. However, his flamboyant persona and the subtexts of many of his songs, from the impossible romance of "I Honestly Love You" to the defiant raunch of "Honest Queen" (1971), clearly identified Allen to his gay fans.

Allen's life and music are the subject of the musical *The Boy from Oz*, featuring an acclaimed performance by Hugh Jackman as Allen, as well as a book by playwright Martin Sherman, which, despite mixed reviews, scored a Broadway success in 2003.

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Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.