



Gilbert, Peggy (1905-2007)

by Linda Rapp

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A virtuoso jazz musician, Peggy Gilbert was also the leader of a number of successful all-women bands. Throughout a career that lasted more than eight decades, she was dedicated to supporting and mentoring other female musicians, and was tireless in demanding that they receive the same respect and opportunities as men.

Peggy Gilbert seemed destined to become a musician. Her father, John Darwin Knechtges, played the violin and was the conductor of the Hawkeye Symphony Orchestra in Sioux City, Iowa. Her mother, Edith Gilbert Knechtges, sang in the chorus at the opera. When Gilbert was born on January 17, 1905, her parents had already acquired a piano for the child's eventual music lessons.

Margaret Fern Knechtges, nicknamed Peggy, fulfilled her parents' aspirations, learning to play both the piano and the violin. She showed ability as a dancer as well. A grade-school teacher taught her and several classmates to do the Highland fling and had them perform it for Scottish entertainer Harry Lauder when he came to town. The music hall performer was charmed and had the children join his troupe for a summer tour.

Gilbert was seven when she made her stage debut. By the age of nine, she was playing both violin and piano in ensembles led by her father.

As a teenager, Gilbert became enamored of jazz and wanted to learn to play the saxophone. Since her high school did not permit girls to play large wind instruments, she took lessons from a local musician.

Gilbert knew immediately that she had found her instrument. "The first time I picked up a sax, I said, 'This is it!' I loved the feel of it--free and loose," she recalled.

After graduating from high school in 1923 Gilbert formed her first band, the Melody Girls. The group played at dances and on the radio in Sioux City.

When John Knechtges died in 1928, it fell to Gilbert to help provide for her mother and grandmother. All three moved to Los Angeles, where Gilbert sought work as a musician. As she embarked on this phase of her career, she adopted her mother's maiden name as her professional surname because people tended to misspell and mispronounce Knechtges.

Gilbert founded a new women's band in Los Angeles. The group changed its name frequently, but was known at various times as Peggy Gilbert and Her Metro Goldwyn Orchestra, Peggy Gilbert and Her Symphonics, and Peggy Gilbert and Her Coeds.

The band sometimes performed on the vaudeville circuit in shows starring such entertainers as George Burns and Gracie Allen, Jack Benny, and Jimmy Durante, but Los Angeles remained their home base. The women performed in stylish ballrooms, including the Garden of Allah, the Coconut Grove, the Palomar,

and the Zenda, and also at private events such as lavish New Year's Eve parties hosted by publisher William Randolph Hearst and his mistress, Marion Davies.

In the late 1930s, under the name the Early Girls, Gilbert and her band played live ninety-minute shows on a Beverly Hills radio station six mornings a week. Gilbert's women's jazz ensembles also performed in the films *The Wet Parade* (1932, directed by Victor Fleming), *Melody for Two* (1937, directed by Louis King), and *The Great Waltz* (1938, directed by Julien Duvivier).

In 1937 Gilbert's band, then known as Peggy Gilbert and Her Orchestra, was the opening act of "The Second Hollywood Swing Concert," which also featured such luminaries as Benny Goodman, Louis Prima, and Les Hite. "If she had been a man, she would have been considered one of the great American band leaders," contends music historian Jeannie Pool, but the music establishment "kept dismissing girl players as a novelty act, a freak show."

When *Down Beat* magazine echoed that sentiment by printing an article entitled "Why Women Musicians Are Inferior" in 1938, Gilbert responded by writing an article of her own, detailing discrimination against women performers. The magazine published it, but under the insulting title "How Can You Blow a Horn with a Brassiere?" Nevertheless, Gilbert's statement "set her as the national advocate for women jazz musicians," says Pool. "She heard from musicians from coast to coast thanking her for speaking out."

During World War II, Gilbert joined the USO. With other women, she put on shows for the troops--once traveling by dogsled to bases in Alaska--and visited wounded military personnel on hospital ships.

Gilbert married a soldier, but they soon divorced. She found her life partner in Kay Boley, a vaudevillian and contortionist who was performing at the same nightclub as Gilbert's band. The two fell in love and remained together for more than six decades.

With the end of World War II and the return of many men from military service, employment opportunities for female musicians declined sharply. Gilbert took a full-time secretarial job at Local 47 of the Musicians Union but still played as many engagements as possible at night and on weekends.

Gilbert was tireless in her support of other women. "Peggy became the chief advocate for women musicians," states Pool. "She worked hard to get them jobs and restart their careers. When you see all those musicals, like the Busby Berkeley productions, with dozens of women playing in the bands, it was Peggy who got them the jobs."

Gilbert retired from her post at the union in 1970 but remained on the Board of Trustees. Ever the champion of women, she contributed a column entitled "Tuning In on Femme Musicians" to the union's monthly publication, *The Overture*, from 1979 to 1984.

Retirement did not bring inactivity for Gilbert; on the contrary, she launched a new and very successful phase of her career. In 1974 she founded the Dixie Belles, a band composed of older women musicians. The group played at jazz festivals, clubs, and private parties in the Los Angeles area before coming to nationwide attention with a performance on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* in 1981. The Dixie Belles went on to appear on many other television programs, including *The Golden Girls*, *Father Murphy*, *Dharma and Greg*, *Married with Children*, *Home Improvement*, *Madame's Place*, and *Ellen*.

The band recorded their only album, *Peggy Gilbert and the Dixie Belles: Dixieland Jazz*, in 1986. It was re-released as a CD in 2006. The Dixie Belles continued to perform together until 1994.

While in her eighties and nineties, Gilbert appeared in numerous television commercials for such companies

as Coca-Cola, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Toyota, and Ultimate Electronics.

Gilbert is the subject of Pool's 2006 documentary *Peggy Gilbert and Her All-Girl Band*. Narrated by the musician's friend and fan Lily Tomlin, the film combines interviews with Gilbert and other musicians with rare archival footage and recordings, photographs, and other documents to tell Gilbert's inspiring story.

Tomlin keeps one of Gilbert's saxophone reeds as a cherished memento. When she asked what had become of Gilbert's instrument, Gilbert told her that she had sold it because "it was way too good a horn not to be played."

Although both Gilbert and Boley had to cope with health problems including cancer, they remained very active, particularly in caring for others. Until 2004 they devoted a great deal of time to assisting homebound friends by bringing them groceries and prescriptions and to calling on other friends in hospitals and nursing homes. Well-versed on Medicare rules, Boley helped people with their paperwork. Gilbert summed up their philosophy: "If you get up each day and do something for someone else, you've done what you are here for."

Pool collaborated with Gilbert to write a biography, *The Peggy Gilbert Story: American Jazz Band Leader, Saxophone Player and Advocate for Women Musicians*. No publication date has been announced.

Gilbert entered the hospital for hip surgery in early 2007. Pool reported that on the eve of the operation, Gilbert "had me reading proofs [of the biography] to her at her bedside."

Unfortunately, complications developed following the surgery, and Gilbert died on February 12, 2007 at the age of 102. She is survived by her longtime partner, Boley.

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