

# Introducing the Incomparable Hildegarde: The Sexuality, Style, and Image of a Forgotten Cultural Icon

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## Recommended Citation

Gallamore, Monica, "Introducing the Incomparable Hildegarde: The Sexuality, Style, and Image of a Forgotten Cultural Icon" (2012). *Dissertations (2009 -)*. Paper 196.  
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INTRODUCING THE INCOMPARABLE HILDEGARDE: THE SEXUALITY,  
STYLE, AND IMAGE OF A FORGOTTEN CULTURAL ICON

by

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A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School,  
Marquette University,  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

May 2012

ABSTRACT  
INTRODUCING THE INCOMPARABLE HILDEGARDE: THE SEXUALITY,  
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Monica S. Gallamore

Marquette University, 2012

This study is an historical biography of the popular American entertainer from the nineteen-forties and fifties named Hildegarde. Known by her first name long before such designations became commonplace, Hildegarde achieved such celebrity status that she influenced women's fashions and promoted a number of consumer products. She even had her own signature Revlon lipstick and nail polish called "Hildegarde Rose." Hildegarde's career spanned for more than seventy years, beginning as a pianist for silent movies in Milwaukee and eventually becoming the darling of nightclubs and supper clubs. Unfortunately, few people remember this entertainer or her influence. She has been overlooked by historians as a cultural influence and a groundbreaking performer even though in 1945 she was the most popular songstress in the nation.

Hildegarde is unique because she did not fit into the accepted archetype of women during her heyday. She was neither a domestic, motherly type nor was she the girl next door. In fact, she and her manager, a woman name Anna Sosenko, worked together as well as lived together, all of which was public knowledge. Yet this did not deter the American public from adoring Hildegarde. She set fashion standards for women, and numerous celebrities used her image and copied her act to gain popularity. By the nineteen fifties, she was proclaimed the most impersonated performer in show business.

This dissertation encompasses the time from her birth in 1906 through her death in 2005. Included in this study are examinations of: Milwaukee in the 1920s, the life and times of vaudeville performers, the culture of cabaret performers in 1930s Paris and London, radio performance and stars in 20<sup>th</sup> century America, and the night-club and supper-club craze of 1940s and 1950s. Of particular importance is her relationship with Anna and Anna's career as one of the only female managers of the time. Hildegarde's life and career is a lense by which to examine popular culture, leisure activities, women's history, and music as well as cultural trends and attitudes in twentieth-century America.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Monica S. Gallamore

Projects of this sort do not get completed without enormous support from family, friends, colleagues, archivists, and professors. I am indebted to numerous people who have supported me throughout the researching and writing of my dissertation, and also throughout the process of returning to college as a non-traditional student. First and foremost I must thank my dissertation director, Dr. Thomas Jablonsky. He has provided support, dedication, and countless hours of work to ensure my success. Over the years, Dr. Jablonsky has mentored me as an academic, improved my writing, and changed how I view history. But most importantly, he shared my enthusiasm for my project, something for which I will be eternally grateful. I also owe thanks to the members of my committee with whom I have had the pleasure of working. Dr. Kristen Foster originally recognized the potential of Hildegarde's life as a dissertation topic. Dr. Phillip Naylor understood the importance of Hildegarde in popular music and culture and has over the years been a fellow musician with whom I could talk about guitars and stress management through playing music. I owe a special thanks to Dr. Steven Avella, first, for ensuring I was accepted with funding to Marquette University and most importantly, for being my friend.

Though not on my committee, I owe a special thank you to Matt Blessing, Director of the Library-Archives Division of the Wisconsin Historical Society (formerly Head of Special Collections and Archives at Marquette University). Matt's support and belief in my research led him to meet with me in New York City to view a potential acquisition. It was this collection which yielded the generous donation of Hildegarde's diaries to Marquette University. I have worked in various archives across the United States and am particularly thankful that Ted Hostetler in the Lipscomb Library at Randolph Macon College granted me access to their unprocessed collection of Anna Sosenko. But for me, the Marquette University Special Collections and Archives will always feel like home thanks to Matt and Susan Stawicki-Vrobel who have treated me like royalty when I have worked there.

I owe a great deal to Don Dellair as well. Don lovingly saved Hildegarde's diaries and graciously donated them along with other materials to Marquette University in memory of Hildegarde. In addition he provided personal anecdotes and companionship to me when I was in New York working. And thank you to Pat Still for housing Hildegarde's diaries until they found their home. I would like to also thank Rebecca Silver, Anna's niece who gave me access to her private collection of her aunt's things as well as shared funny stories about life with Anna and Hildegarde.

My friends and family have provided an invaluable support system during this project. I am particularly thankful for Dr. Monica C. Witkowski and Chrissy Jaworski who have patiently listened to me, supported me, shared ideas, and provided comic relief when I needed it. I have relied on them a great deal and feel lucky to have had them and their mothers in my close circle. My thanks to my sister, Melody H. Gallamore, for encouraging me to return to college, listening to my history stories, and giving the world

Sophia. I am grateful to my mother Bonnie Barnes for encouraging me to love books, love reading, and convincing me I could do anything I set my mind to. It was my mother who took me to New Orleans and showed me the city where jazz was born and the past is alive and vibrant. It was there I learned to love the complex and diverse stories that are American history.

And lastly I thank my wonderful husband and travelling companion, Stanford K. Lester. He has shared my vision and quest for a Ph.D. since I first decided to pursue this path. This project is as much his as it is mine. He has never wavered in his belief in me and this dissertation. It was Stan who inspired and pushed me to keep going when I became disillusioned and I could not have completed this without him.

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## NOTE

All of the Hildegarde's diaries are part of the Hildegarde (Loretta Sell) Papers Collection at Marquette University. They will be hereafter cited as Diaries.

The scrapbooks contained in the Hildegarde Papers of the Billy Rose Theater Collection at the New York Public Library are called "Volumes" by this archive. Therefore, they will be cited as "Volumes" rather than "Scrapbooks."

All inflation calculations in this manuscript used the Consumer Price Index Inflation Calculator provided online by the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics. <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl>.

There are some instances in this manuscript where surnames are absent. In some cases this was because the last names were not given in Hildegarde's diaries. At other times, I intentionally did not use family names because some of those mentioned have living relatives.



## Introduction

### Introducing the Incomparable Hildegarde: The Sexuality, Style, and Image of a Forgotten Cultural Icon

Social Historians who are disposed to interpret the life and times of 1943 exclusively in terms of Frank Sinatra's rise and Mrs. Pruneface's fall might one day find themselves in the embarrassing position of having overlooked Hildegarde Loretta Sell.<sup>1</sup>

On July 29, 2005, at ninety-nine years old, Hildegarde Loretta Sell of Adell, New Holstein and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and of New York City passed away. Her death marked Hildegarde's last foray into national and international news. The Incomparable Hildegarde, as she was known for the majority of her seventy-year career, died leaving her legacy in the hands of the newspaper writers and editors who memorialized her career. For the next week, Hildegarde's obituary appeared in various forms in newspapers around the world. "Hildegarde, Influential Cabaret Headliner, Is Dead at 99" read the *New York Times* headline of Hildegarde's obituary.<sup>2</sup> The *Los Angeles Times* carried her story under "Hildegarde, 99; Cabaret Singer, First of Single Name Stars" while *The Gold Coast Bulletin*, an Australian newspaper, proclaimed: "Cabaret Ends; Hildegarde's Final Curtain."<sup>3</sup> These are but a few of the numerous appearances her death made in newspapers. Her "final curtain" also appeared in the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Washington Post*, the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, and in the British newspapers, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, and *The Times* as well as on Nation Public Radio (NPR).<sup>4</sup> In her Wisconsin hometown paper, the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, her passing actually made the front page of the Sunday edition. All of the obituaries carried the story of Hildegarde's rise to fame, her beginning in vaudeville, and information about her influence on fashion.<sup>5</sup> They gave

her credit for starting the trend of single named performers, wearing the most chic of evening gowns, and having been one of the highest paid performers in the 1940s. Most mentioned her long time relationship with her manager of twenty-six years, Anna Sosenko. Some even included the fact that Sosenko, who had passed away five years earlier, was credited with having created Hildegarde's entire celebrity persona and selling it to the American public.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the praise in her obituaries, Hildegarde passed away in relative obscurity. It is without doubt that few Americans outside of fervent fans of cabaret had any working knowledge of this "influential" star who started the "single-name vogue among entertainers," although most would recognize those who inherited the idea including Liberace, Twiggy, Cher, Prince, and Madonna.<sup>7</sup> In spite of her professional career lasting over seventy-years, Hildegarde's celebrity status had long faded by the time she died. Occasionally, in her later years, she had appeared in some way in popular culture where she always longed to be. The last time this happened before her death occurred in 1998. In the June 1998 edition of *Vanity Fair*, Annie Leibovitz and Richard Merkin published an article lamenting the lost glamour of New York City night life. The article, titled "Sophisticated Ladies," used the careers of four famous women that Liebovitz and Merkin deemed responsible for this bygone era of cabarets and night-clubs. Three of the women—Lena Horne, Eartha Kitt, and Julie Wilson—are known to most as divas of the smoky night-club and supper-club scene of the mid-twentieth century. Hildegarde, the fourth diva, was probably not as recognizable. Even in this modern age, it seems most Americans would recognize the names Lena Horne and Eartha Kitt as representative of American women in music. But few know Hildegarde. The *Vanity Fair* article, much like her obituaries, touted

the Incomparable Hildegarde as a favorite of European royalty and such luminaries as Eleanor Roosevelt. Merkin and Liebovitz, confined by space limitations however, could not list all of Hildegarde's accomplishments other than mentioning her estimated 100,000 performances.<sup>8</sup>

In spite of Leibovitz and Merkin deeming Hildegarde as one of the most important divas of New York City night life and her glowing reviews after her death, in reality Hildegarde, her reputation, and her legacy have been lost in American memory and forgotten among social, cultural, and music historians. For example, in the encyclopedia, *Women and Music in America Since 1900*, neither Hildegarde nor her manager Anna Sosenko were mentioned even though both fit into the criteria for inclusion into this collection. The editors included women only if they had made a significant contribution to music and "advanced the role of women in music" as well as lived and worked the majority of their lives in the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> It seems Hildegarde's seventy years on stage should have earned at least an honorable mention. Hildegarde is also absent in Dorothy Marcic's *Respect: Women and Popular Music*.<sup>10</sup> In this study Marcic describes the accepted archetypes of women in American culture throughout the twentieth-century. Perhaps Hildegarde is missing here because she did not fit into the typical media image for women which, according to Marcic and other historians such as Carloyn Kitch, is dichotomized into the images of the good girl or bad girl.<sup>11</sup>

Hildegarde was born in 1906 and her professional career began in the 1920s, playing piano and organ for silent movie theaters in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She left Milwaukee for the vaudeville circuits and began travelling the country and the world as well as building her confidence on stage. During the 1930s after spending a few years in

vaudeville, she and her manager Anna Sosenko left the United States and set up residency in Paris and London. It is in the cabarets of Paris where Hildegard honed her skills as a featured artiste and where Anna honed her skills as a brash and fierce manager who nearly always got what she demanded. While in Europe, Anna's talent as an innovator in entertainment first became apparent. By 1939 when Hildegard burst onto the national American scene on the cover of *Life* magazine, she was very different from other American women and many American stars. Her image was outside of the accepted archetype of the "American woman" who was domestic and bound to hearth and home. She was sensual, presented with an air of European mystery, and had an extravagant glamour which seemed at odds with the Great Depression that was gripping other Americans. Hildegard did not feel the need to conform as was expected of other celebrities of her era. It is ludicrous to see such celebrities as Joan Crawford posing in a kitchen in an apron and mopping the floor, yet even this screen star and numerous others succumbed to the pressure of looking domestic. Hildegard's popularity never hinged on her willingness to play the part of domestic goddess. She was single, professional, childless, successful, and unapologetic. At the height of her career throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Hildegard was well outside the boundaries of accepted female roles in society. Part of this was due to her relationship with her manager, Anna Sosenko. It was unusual to have a female manager in show business in the mid-twentieth century. It was even more unusual to have a female manager with whom a celebrity shared both a public and a private life. Anna and Hildegard had a live-in relationship in which they shared a home and a bank account and a business association for which there was never a contract. Theirs was a twenty-six year, same sex

relationship that was public and apparently accepted. It was Anna who created Hildegard's image and then carefully sold it to the public.

Hildegard was on tour with a Gus Edwards vaudeville show when she met Anna in the early 1930s. Anna helped her mother run a boarding house in New Jersey where Hildegard was staying. Anna followed Hildegard to New York City. She eventually joined together with Hildegard as her personal manager. This relationship would prove to be the most important professionally and personally for Hildegard. Anna shaped Hildegard's on-stage persona, marketed her, publicized her, and in 1934, wrote her first successful song, "Darling, Je Vous Aime Beaucoup," which became Hildy's signature piece. Again, Anna Sosenko was one of the only, if not the only, female managers of any performer at the time and she established her reputation as a tough as nails manager but also as a songwriter with "Darling Je Vous Aime Beaucoup." Not long after Anna joined Hildegard in New York City, they left for Europe to tour. Their stay in Europe proved to be the most important period in the formation of the persona the world came to know as The Incomparable Hildegard. It was during their time in Europe that Anna established a pattern of controlling Hildegard both professionally and personally. This was something that did not go unnoticed by the media. Anna's control of Hildegard was so notorious that the media often referred to Anna as Hildegard's *svengali*.

Anna became a master of media manipulation. It was Anna who sold Hildegard to the American press as the darling of the European royalty. While performing in Paris and London, Anna Sosenko worked diligently getting attention for Hildegard back in the United States. She carefully made sure Americans knew about Hildegard's status with European royalty. Newspaper stories told that King Gustav of Sweden personally

requested to see Hildegarde when he visited Paris. The American public bought Anna's product. While Hildegarde was performing at places like the Café de Paris in London and at the Casanova Club in Paris, Sosenko was busy selling Hildegarde's European successes to American newspapers and publishing her own commentaries on jazz.<sup>12</sup> It was true that Hildegarde attracted the attention of some royalty and was a popular performer in Europe. Sosenko, however, manipulated these facts to build her into an American sensation. Anna later took credit for her innovation saying: "I made her a sensation long before she was a sensation."<sup>13</sup> When Anna and Hildy returned to the United States, Hildegarde's reputation was established as a star in Europe. Hildegarde left the U.S. as vaudevillian and returned a chanteuse. In 1936, Hildegarde's status garnered her the opportunity to become the "Television Girl." This title was given to her after she performed for one of the first television broadcasts in New York City. While this was just a test, it would provide enough publicity for her to continue on her quest for stardom.

After she appeared in 1939 on the cover of *Life*, her career blossomed. Much of her publicity, reinforced by the *Life* article, focused on her reputation as an international chanteuse and what was considered an exotic accent. The "exotic" label appeared in newspapers throughout the United States and was no doubt carefully sold by Anna.<sup>14</sup> These stories were accompanied by descriptions of her as French or mysterious, and her accent led to much speculation about her heritage. Her exotic nature and mystifying heritage implied she was outside of acceptable American styled sexuality for women.<sup>15</sup> The exotic and mysterious accent which lent an air of mystery to Hildegarde's persona was in reality nothing more than the lingering sound of her hometown of Milwaukee and her German parents. The audiences did not know the difference.

From 1939 throughout much of the 1940s, Americans heard Hildegard on the radio as a solo artist singing tunes that were well-known hits, many of which became associated with war-time America. As noted, her first hit was “Darling Je Vous Aime Beaucoup,” written by Anna. Hildy was known as the first artist to record and then have a “hit” record with “I’ll Be Seeing You,” a song that was one of the most recognizable songs from the war era. She was associated so much with this piece that she used it to close her shows. This was something that other artists, most notably Liberace, would “borrow” from her performance. She also recorded the first English version of “Lili Marlene.” Her rendition of “Lili” was so popular that it sold 43,000 copies in its first two weeks of release.<sup>16</sup> By 1943, Hildegard had “immortalized” another well known song from the 1940s by Jerome Kern, titled “The Last Time I Saw Paris.”<sup>17</sup> Her rendition was acknowledged at the time as “one of the most widely circulated records Decca had ever printed.”<sup>18</sup> The popularity of her recording of “The Last Time I Saw Paris” made headlines such as “Hildegard in Boston, Made Axis Hate Her for Her Rendition of ‘Paris’ Song,” a status which undoubtedly led to more record sales.<sup>19</sup>

Her popularity as a solo artist was evident in the ratings of the 1940s. *Billboard* kept track of ratings of radio programs and solo artists as well as carried news stories about the music industry. Hildegard was featured regularly in these stories. By January of 1943, Hildegard was featured on the cover of *Billboard* and by 1945 she was heralded as “America’s No. 1 Songstress.”<sup>20</sup> The title of “Number One Songstress” was given to Hildegard because the Hooperatings (a prominent rating system of the era) which came out in the May 1945 *Billboard* showed Hildegard was second only to Bing Crosby in the hearts of Americans. Other entertainers entrenched in American popular culture and seen

as representative of 1940s American music such as Frank Sinatra, Kate Smith, and Dinah Shore are on the Hooperating as well, but none were able to surpass Hildegarde or Bing Crosby.<sup>21</sup> In November of 1945, Hooperatings ranked her radio program, *Hildegarde's Raleigh Room*, as the eighth most popular radio program in America.<sup>22</sup> Hildegarde's celebrity status was entrenched in her persona as a radio host. Whereas the majority of other female singers played the role of guest, Hildegarde was busy hosting several of her own shows. Her first foray into hosting began in February of 1939 with *Ninety-Nine Men and a Girl*. No doubt this program, which lasted for seven months, was also partly responsible for the cover of *Life* in April of that same year. Her continuing popularity led to her hosting *Beat the Band* in the early 1940s and eventually hosting *Hildegarde's Raleigh Room*.<sup>23</sup> It is said that the *Raleigh Room* was so popular that it caused movie ticket sales to suffer on the night it was broadcast.<sup>24</sup>

In spite of her success throughout the 1940s as a solo artist and radio host, Hildegarde's only lasting legacy was as a night-club and supper-club performer, as evidenced by the *Vanity Fair* article in 1998. This reputation was well deserved. She was acknowledged at the time as having single handedly built the supper-club craze in New York City. Hildegarde perfected her skills as a cabaret performer in Europe and once she returned to the United States, she became the darling of the night-clubs. Her performance was unique: accompanying herself on the piano, usually playing in full length opera gloves, and fronting her own orchestra. She was very different than other female entertainers of the era who sang but were not musicians. She became the performer most associated with the Persian Room at the Plaza Hotel and set a record for performances there.<sup>25</sup>



Hildegarde captivated her audiences. Her performances at supper-clubs, which required the patron have enough money for a cover charge and the cost of dinner, sold out even during war time rationing and curfews. It was reported that “her following long ago reached the proportions of a cult” and her “rabid and well-dressed” fans were often to be seen standing on chairs in the back of the room to see her “work her magic at the piano.”<sup>26</sup> Hildegarde sold out supper-clubs across the nation and performed in venues from coast to coast. In fact she broke records for attendance in many of the venues where she performed such as in the Empire Room at the Palmer House in Chicago.

Hildegarde entertained for many years, yet she showed almost no signs of aging as she moved from the war-era into the television era. Her image stayed relatively the same while her performances, popularity, and celebrity status were transformed over time. Hildegarde’s fashion sense and her style influenced American women who looked to her as a standard of chic. Her performance clothes were so elegant and refined that the *New York Times* “acknowledged [her] as a potent fashion influence.”<sup>27</sup> Her style ensured she was named several times on the list of “Best Dressed Women in America.”<sup>28</sup> As time passed, it was an obvious fact that Hildegarde had been in the business for a long time, but newspaper articles ensured their readers that Hildegarde was “still” the best. One journalist assured his readers in the late 1940s, “Hildegarde Still Owns Magic Touch” and that her years in front of audiences meant her performance and skills at the piano had become even better.<sup>29</sup> “Hildegarde is Still the Enchantress” proclaimed the column “Café Life in New York” in 1951. This columnist insisted Hildegarde was not only unique, but remained the best in her field.<sup>30</sup> This pattern continued through the end of the 1950s as is evidenced by an article which circulated around the United States in 1959 saying: “Incomparable

Hildegarde, Still Supper Club Queen.”<sup>31</sup> Hildegarde continued to woo new fans in the 1950s as well. One new convert was Art Spooner, a journalist for *The Pointer* (this was the magazine of the United States Military Academy). In 1951, Spooner attended one of Hildegarde’s shows and wrote that he had low expectations for the show since he had “a rather low opinion of her singing.”<sup>32</sup> Hildegarde’s performance won over this naysayer. He wrote: “Her fame is understandable. She has a husky voice with a warm quality that makes you feel that she is singing for you alone, and that the rest of the audience are outsiders.”<sup>33</sup>

As the years passed, Hildegarde and Anna worked to keep the career from becoming stagnant and in an innovative move announced a cross country tour. The tour in the early 1950s was replete with a hot pink Mack Truck emblazoned with a gloved hand and Hildegarde’s autograph to haul her concert regalia. This was a two and a half-year tour of the U.S. and Canada. During that time she played seventy-two cities in twenty-nine states as well as three cities in Canada.<sup>34</sup> This show was advertised as a “One Woman Show” and had an arduous schedule. This tour was notable for several reasons. For example, in addition to the tour being intertwined with Mack Truck advertising, Hildegarde and Anna also collaborated with the Rand McNally company. Rand McNally advertised her tour on a two-page spread which featured one of their maps and Hildegarde’s schedule. This was Hildegarde’s last major entertainment innovation during her heyday. A few years after this tour, Hildegarde and Anna ceased to exist. Hildegarde was now on her own with poor management and an eventual fall from popularity.

Hildegarde’s professional career spanned more than seventy years and during her heyday she was so well known that her signature style of wearing full length opera gloves

and her white handkerchiefs became fashionable for American women's style. The list of firsts for Hildegard is exhaustive. She was the first popular entertainer to be known by only one name. Her influence of women's fashion was significant as were her earnings. Her salary was discussed extensively and it was widely publicized in 1943 that she and her female manager Anna Sosenko grossed \$150,000.<sup>35</sup> Hildegard, her fashion sense, and advice appeared in articles on the front pages of society sections of newspaper across the country. Hildy's image and style was used to advertise a variety of items including pantyhose, couturier's design houses, radios, cigarettes, beer, handkerchiefs, and full length gloves among other things. One of her most impressive collaborations came when Revlon developed a signature lip color and nail polish named "Hildegard Rose."

By the late 1940s and early 1950s, articles in newspapers discussed Hildegard as the most impersonated performer in show business. Numerous celebrities, most notably Liberace, used Hildegard's performance style as a model on which to base their own. Liberace commented that the only time he ever saw a red carpet literally rolled out for a performer was for Hildegard. While certainly such mimicry was flattering, Hildegard commented later that Liberace "copped my whole act."<sup>36</sup> Many other performers used imagery that was distinctly copied from Hildegard in order to present themselves to the American public. This includes Dinah Shore. Once Shore wanted to make the transition from radio to television Warner Brothers deemed her too dark and too ethnic.<sup>37</sup> They bleached her skin and hair and capped her teeth and eventually presented her in her publicity photos in an evening gown, full length opera gloves, and in a characteristic "Hildegard pose" with her arms overhead, something Hildegard noted in one of her scrapbooks.<sup>38</sup> Hildegard influenced both the famous and the not famous in American

culture, and her advice on poise, make-up, and fashion as well as how to wear hats appeared throughout the United States in small towns and large urban areas.

If Hildegarde was as influential as her obituaries and *Vanity Fair* proclaimed, it is confusing that she is not remembered historically in the era during which she was popular. The fact that she is overlooked by historians and the entertainment industry as a whole leaves Hildegarde's career and influence enshrouded for most of the world, outside of the relatively small cabaret world and the Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender (LGBT) community (who have adopted Anna and her as the first "out" lesbian couple in entertainment). Hildegarde's obituaries asserted claims that had been made throughout the years in various newspapers and magazines. With these assertions it seems other scholars might have investigated whether or not some of them were true, yet thus far this has not happened in a substantial way. Hildy's success in recording and performing a range of American standards has been overlooked. An example of this is her recording of the song "The Last Time I saw Paris," a piece that is recognizable to countless people and closely associated with the war era in the United States. John Bush Jones published a book entitled *The Songs That Fought the War: Popular Music and the Home Front, 1939-1945* with Brandeis University Press in 2006. In it he talks about the "Paris" song and notes that the song "was not a smash hit when it first appeared." He suggests that no artist charted the song including Hildegarde.<sup>39</sup> "Still," he says, "millions of Americans heard" the song when it appeared in the movie *Lady Be Good* with Anne Southern singing it. Jones clearly leads the reader into believing that the song was a hit only because it appeared in the movie which was released in mid-September 1941. Another historian, Ken Bloom in *The American Songbook: The Singers, Songwriters, and the*

*Songs* says “the song was introduced by Kate Smith” and it became so popular that it was included in the movie.<sup>40</sup> He clearly gave Kate Smith credit for the song’s popularity. Ironically enough, Bloom included a small biography section on Hildegarde, yet never connected the “Paris” song with her. As will be explained in Chapter Three, Hildegarde was closely associated with this song and made it popular in the 1940s, so much so that she made headlines with it for allegedly making the Axis Powers angry over her rendition. Even *Time* magazine proclaimed Hildegarde’s recording of the song as the best version. The books by Jones and Bloom are but two examples of many accounts that discuss the “Paris” song and they are representative of the inaccuracies perpetuated by scholars who have the responsibility to fact check. It is true the song appeared in the movie, but most likely due to a popularity that was, however, due to Hildegarde, not to Kate Smith. This example of inaccurate representation of American culture is only one of the many reasons that exploring one person’s life in-depth benefits the larger narrative of history.

### **Why Biography, Why Hildegarde**

This dissertation is a scholarly biography of Hildegarde. Rather than simply retelling the day to day activities of Hildegarde’s life, this work looks at the world in which Hildegarde existed. This includes her childhood, career, and death and includes her family, friends, culture, and events. Because Hildegarde lived so long (ninety-nine years) and worked so long (roughly seventy-years), her life was truly a lens by which to view the majority of the twentieth-century politics, culture, and entertainment.

Hildegarde lived through and often participated in some of the most important events in

modern-American life. For example, she was born in 1906 in a relatively rural area of Wisconsin where one of her uncles was a harness maker. Once she and her family, like countless others in the early twentieth-century urbanized, Hildegarde began using streetcars, riding in automobiles, and by the end of her career flew by commercial flights to various engagements.

This is quite a transition, but pales in comparison to the changes made in entertainment during her career. Hildegarde began playing as a paid musician at sixteen-years old. She played piano at Milwaukee silent movie theaters. While still in Milwaukee, Hildegarde became involved with the newest technological advance in entertainment, the beginnings of radio, and after attending Marquette University's College of Music, went on the road with a vaudeville troop. In the 1930s, Hildegarde, like many of her colleagues in the industry, sought fame and an escape from the Great Depression in Paris and London. Once back home in the United States, Hildegarde cut records, had her own radio programs, became the darling of Café Society, set standards in night-clubs and supper-clubs, and eventually appeared on television.

Since this work begins with Hildegarde's birth and ends with her death, it covers a wide range of time and societal/cultural changes. This necessitates discussing in depth the movement of America and Americans from the inter-war period to the twenty-first century. The significance and goals for this work are complicated. On one level this study looks at the life of an entertainer—her successes and failures and legacy. To do that adequately means that this one life must serve as a fulcrum around which the rest of the story of the era emerges, be it Milwaukee in the 1920s, Paris in the 1930s, or New York in the 1940s. Another facet of this work is the fact that Hildegarde in her heyday

existed well outside of the same expectations and archetypes to which other female celebrities and regular women adhered. Although other women in the industry lived outside of these terms, such as Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo, they both had one thing Hildegarde never did: marriages and relationships with men. So even though their sexual behaviors and reputations may have been outside the accepted norm during their popularity, their bisexuality still kept them within the acceptable range of heterosexuality for influential women. Hildegarde as an adult was never linked in any tangible manner with a man. That in and of itself made her different. Yet it did not affect her popularity or earnings. Her femininity, glamour, and manner contrasted blatantly with Anna Sosenko's wool suits, brusqueness, and what was presented in the press as masculinity. The third point of this dissertation is to show that Hildegarde, though forgotten and neglected by most historians and in popular memory, was a highly influential and popular performer and had more popularity than many of her contemporaries who are better entrenched in the historical record and in the American memory. Many people find the name Kate Smith or at least "God Bless America," her signature song, familiar yet have no recognition of Hildegarde or "Darling Je Vous Aime Beaucoup," except to know that song was popularized by Nat King Cole in the 1950s.

This academic biography uses Hildegarde's life to explore American culture. The idea of biography as a showcase of history often lives on the fringes of history as an academic discipline. Numerous historians have speculated about the legitimacy of writing biography rather than engaging in a more traditional analysis, as if the two are mutually exclusive. In the June 2009 edition of the *American Historical Review*, the *AHR* Roundtable discussion was dedicated to historical biography. Several noted

historians were asked to participate by writing articles about this apparently controversial topic. The “Introduction,” by David Nasaw, characterized scholarly biography as “the profession’s unloved stepchild.”<sup>41</sup> Later in his article, he defended biography as a real but academic approach to delve deeply into nuances of American life. He was also careful to note that numerous well-respected historians have involved themselves with biography, including several of the most recent presidents of the American Historical Association. In spite of this, as Nasaw pointed out, the major history journals including the *American Historical Review* will not review historical/scholarly biographies.<sup>42</sup> This is ironic in light of the fact that numerous highly reputable university presses publish biographies of historical figures ranging from monarchs of Europe and American Founding Fathers to laborers and entertainers. It takes relatively little effort to discover Yale University Press has an entire section of published material titled “Biography” which, as of this writing, contains a list of 502 biographies they have published since 1959. Yet as Nasaw pointed out and as Lois Banner reiterated in her contribution to the *AHR* Roundtable, biography has been downgraded because some have seen it as non-academic with regard to historical analysis.<sup>43</sup> Banner suggested that this reputation began due to the movement of professional historians in the 1960s towards statistical analysis and demographic studies.

Lois Banner enumerated many of the arguments repeated over the years which classified biography as inferior to the “rest” of history. One of her assertions was that because non-scholars often write biography and lack a rigorous historical training, the entire genre of biographical history is sometimes cast aside. If this is true, then it would be a curious reality because countless “Civil War buffs,” with little or no academic



training, have produced bookshelves full Civil War studies. Yet no historians have not disregarded writing about the Civil War because it was at times tainted with “hero worship.” The same holds true for military and war studies which over the years have inspired innumerable biographical volumes written by a wide variety of authors. Banner also pointed out the widely held belief that biography was limited because it only examined “one life.” This too seems a simplistic analysis of biography, something which Banner pointed out when she explained that no capable scholarly biographer falls into the trap of offering a simplistic day by day discussion of a person’s life but instead provides historical context and interpretation of the historical narrative. Banner’s opinion about biography was particularly interesting because she like many others chose to write a biography and chose to write it about a celebrity, Marilyn Monroe.

Scholarly biographers use their subject as a lens by which to view the era, society, culture, politics, and larger historical narrative in which their subjects existed. This is the nature of my study. Although I have been warned since the beginning of this dissertation by numerous academics not to write an historical biography because I would not be taken seriously and because it was not considered “real” history by others in the field, I chose to write a scholarly biography anyway. I often wondered if those giving that advice had bothered to contact Gerda Lerner and explain this to her. That in spite of the fact that she was the founder of Women’s History as a discipline, her work was less than legitimate because she established herself as an academic and this new field of study on the back of her biography of the Grimké sisters.<sup>44</sup> Presumably, this has not and will not occur. When Gerda Lerner and her colleagues stepped into the field of Women’s History for the first time, they were in a way correcting the historical record. They were “setting the

record straight.” Women historically were omitted from studies of the past; they mattered little and existed only on the fringe of the important historical events. As a consequence, early women’s historians used biographies to bring out of the shadows the activities, lives, and agency of numerous women who were traditionally overlooked as an authentic part of American society.

I intend my work to follow in their hallowed footsteps, hoping to help set the record straight. There are still portions of the historical record that need to be corrected. This fact is illustrated by the previously discussed songs and by many other topics I will cover in this dissertation. Although I point to a lack of rigorous investigation for the flawed historical record, this is not necessarily the full story. Historians like most people, are affected by their own backgrounds and ideas. They/we easily fall into the trap of accepting that Kate Smith and Dinah Shore were the most popular female entertainers on radio in the 1940s because that is what Americans, as a whole, have embraced over the years as part of our collective memory. Once those “truths” pass into the mainstream, they become part of the collective American narrative and memory. This means it falls on historians who write biography to “fix” the historical record as was illustrated by those who founded the field of Women’s History. By delving into individual lives and examining closely the culture around them, different and new interpretations of historical events emerged.

Over the years I have had the pleasure to meet several other professional historians who are also setting the record straight with their work on biographies. Through them I have come to believe that the discipline of history actually *needs* academics to write historical biographies. The most interesting of them, Gordon W.

Knight, presented at the Popular Culture/American Culture Association National Conference his paper “General Edward Forester (1830-1901): Correcting the Biography of An Inveterate Liar.”<sup>45</sup> Gordon discussed the idea that lies told by his subject, Forester, in his autobiography were not only lies, but repeatedly incessantly over the years by noted historians who opted not to fact check their source, something all historians are trained to do. It was from the title of another paper given by Susie Skarl, “Four Guys, Four Different Versions: Setting the Record Straight on Jersey Boys and Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons” (a paper about the successful stage production called *Jersey Boys* as it compared to the realities of the real Jersey Boys) that I originally began thinking about the idea of academic and scholarly biographies setting the record straight about a mistaken historical narrative.<sup>46</sup>

The loss of Hildegarde’s legacy in a modern context and even her exclusion while she was still live is a conundrum. Recently, Catherine Strong argued in “Grunge, Riot Grrrl and the Forgetting of Women in Popular Culture” that women and their contributions are frequently forgotten in popular music, even while they are still alive. This may simply be due to their gender.<sup>47</sup> Even though Strong is writing primarily about rock and roll and the grunge scene, it applies to Hildegarde and her era. Strong’s main idea is that women and their legacies are subverted and then supplanted by the men around them because of the overarching perception that women do not produce “serious” music like their male counterparts. According to Strong this perception is often due to women being singers but not musicians. This analysis is important because it applies directly to Hildegarde. First, her legacy has been supplanted by the men who carried on in a style that was distinctly Hildegarde’s, such as Liberace and later the “Rat Pack.”

Liberace's love of Hildegarde and use of her stage personality and even his "theft" of her song "I'll Be Seeing You" to close his shows is a glaring example of the subjugation of the female (Hildegarde) for the male (Liberace). Second, Hildegarde did not simply front an orchestra. She played the piano and often led her orchestra, and even though she did not write her own music, her female manager, Anna did. Hildegarde's signature song "Darling Je Vous Aime Beaucoup," written by Anna for Hildegarde, has also been hijacked by Nat King Cole who had a hit with the song in the early 1950s. This means Hildegarde's main claim to fame, her signature piece, was taken by a man and eventually became associated with him.

Strong's article presents interesting arguments for Hildegarde's opaqueness in the historical record which began while she still pursued her career. This reason is directly connected to the masculinization of music in the collective memory but is more complicated and insidious. According to Jennifer Terry's chapter, "Momism and the Making of Treasonous Homosexuals" in the book *Bad Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America*, American culture underwent a make-over in the early 1950s.<sup>48</sup> She contends that the extreme misogynistic viewpoints sweeping through American culture and society were accompanied by a distinct homophobia and was due to the increased number of women in the workforce during the previous war.<sup>49</sup> A crisis of gender identity arose and all the ills of society could be cured with a return to Republican Motherhood. Women needed to be in the home raising their children. In this way women could eradicate the damage done by the influence of masculine women in the workforce—as well as homosexuals (also known as "sexual inverts")—and thereby reverse the sexuality issues which had lingered from the wild decade of the 1920s.<sup>50</sup>

The 1950s was about the family. Lesbians and unmarried women threatened the sanctity of the household.<sup>51</sup> This reaction towards homosexuality and the perceived issues of those living outside accepted (and needed) norms meant many in the gay community were driven even more into the privacy of their own world. Terry points out that the repulsion of Americans towards the LGBT world was institutionalized through psychiatric studies which painted the community in a negative light. Then as a political strategy to attack Franklin Delano Roosevelt's government and paint him in a negative light, voices whispered that gay men were associated with his administration. America's security was at stake. These insinuations publicized the "establishment's" view of the very world in which Hildegard existed. Clearly Hildy and Anna were far outside the newly accepted sex divisions of society. They were not married, had no children, and did not work in the home. That cast them "as fundamentally selfish and neglectful."<sup>52</sup> If this is true, and it was for many other public gay couples, this might have been the reason for Hildegard's vanishing act in the public eye in the 1950s. It is important to note that it was the early 1950s when Hildegard and Anna's troubles became most notorious and most public. Admittedly, there were other women in entertainment who did not suffer repercussions for their behavior but they pretended to be good wives and mothers, and most importantly, did not succumb to the influences of a *svengali* like Anna Sosenko.

Another factor in Hildegard's forgotten status was her inability to make the last technological transition of the twentieth-century and that was to television. Even though in 1937, she was one of the first people broadcast on television during a test, the "Television Girl," as she was subsequently known, never moved from the radio or live performance to what was to become the most important tool of entertainment of all time.

Hildegarde toyed with the idea of television and appeared as a guest on several programs in the 1950s, but she never became the star of her own show as did her rivals like Dinah Shore. This was partly due to Anna refusing to give away for free on television what audiences still wanted to pay to see live.<sup>53</sup> Another part of her not moving to television was no doubt due to Hildegarde's age. For Anna, her public response to television was fiscal. Instead of saying Hildegarde was not ready for television, she insisted that "Television was not ready for Hildegarde."<sup>54</sup> Anna's reasoning was protecting Hildegarde and herself financially but it may have been protecting Hildegarde in another way as well. Hildegarde looked ageless in photographs and in person, but her debut as an entertainer in vaudeville was well documented. This made it difficult for her to disguise or deny her age. As was pointed out by Diane Negra in "Re-Made for Television: Hedy Lamarr's Post-War Star Textuality," for some celebrities their glamour was out of place appearing on the small screen to an audience in their living rooms while they ate their dinners.<sup>55</sup> Hildegarde's glamour coupled with her age meant Hildegarde was not destined for television, in spite of what numerous articles said.

I contend that Hildegarde's absence from the historical record is in fact a mixture of all these arguments. Hildegarde's lifestyle and her "partner" kept her from being part of the archetype expected for women in postwar America. While this was apparently accepted by the public in the 1940s in spite of the innuendo about the nature of their relationship, by the 1950s the non-stereotypical relationship with Anna was being rejected. Add to this that Hildegarde never transitioned to television as did most of her contemporaries who subsequently remain part of American memory. It also seems plausible that Hildy's relationship with Anna and her continued connection to her

Europeaness became out of place in the 1950s. As an example, Hedy Lamarr had to subvert her European identity and ethnicity. Diane Negra argued that Lamar's ethnicity and exoticness became a liability in 1950s America because America had moved past the war era and now stressed a conformity to American ideals and "Americanization."<sup>56</sup> While she was writing about television, this applies to all of the entertainment industry and American society. The female celebrities who rose unscathed in the 1950s are Dinah Shore, whose ethnicity was also eradicated, and Kate Smith, an all-American girl next door whose weight buffered her spinsterhood in the public's eyes. Kate Smith's weight in particular protected her unmarried status from scrutiny. As was expressed by a social scientist of her own time, her size rendered her "sexless."<sup>57</sup>

Some celebrities, like Marilyn Monroe, also seem out of place in the 1950s conformity. Monroe's rise as a star seems incongruent with the morality of the 1950s since she made her start as a nude pin-up girl. But even Monroe fit the bill as the "all-American girl" and eventually rose to prominence. In essence, the very thing which set Hildegard apart throughout her days in vaudeville and right up through post-war 1940s was no longer *en vogue*. Like Hedy Lamarr, Hildegard needed to subvert her sexuality, European identity, and singleness to remain part of the American narrative. None of this played well for American television audiences. For Hildegard to have made a transition to television, all of the previous mentioned identity markers would had to be eliminated, not to mention the glamour element which did not play well on television either. Once those things were gone, Hildegard's celebrity identity would not be Hildegard. It was a bankable fact that Hildegard could never have played the role of "girl next door."

In depth analysis of Hildegarde and how she compared to other celebrities of her era is possible because of the work of academics who take an entertainer's life and examine it closely in a scholarly manner whether as a book or within chapter contributions. These biographies provide examinations of the culture and society surrounding their topics. Numerous biographies are published every year about a wide range of people. It takes relatively little effort to find that the genre of celebrity and entertainment biography ranges widely in scope and level of scholarship even as it fills shelf after shelf at libraries and bookstores. Marilyn Monroe and Marlene Dietrich serve as excellent examples of this phenomenon. Books feeding the American consumption of all things Marilyn has produced and continues to produce volumes upon volumes about the pin-up girl and movie star. Sarah Bartlett Churchwell's *The Many Lives of Marilyn Monroe* was published by Metropolitan Books in 2005, Barbara Leaming's *Marilyn Monroe* was released by Crown Publishers in 1998, and in 2001, Cooper Square Press offered *Marilyn Monroe: The Biography* by Donald Spoto which was originally available in 1993 from HarperCollins Publishers.<sup>58</sup> Scholarly examinations of Monroe's life and cultural influence include S. Paige Baty's *American Monroe: The Making of a Body Politic* (1995) by University of California Press, *Circling Marilyn: Text, Body, Performance* by Clara Juncker (2010) from University Press of Southern Denmark, and Lois Banner's biography of Monroe, *MM—Personal: From the Private Archive of Marilyn Monroe* (2011) published by Abrams Books.<sup>59</sup>

Marlene Dietrich was as fascinating as any star could have been in the twentieth-century. The American public's obsession with her has abated little over the years. Popular press biographies of her life abound. *Blue Angel: The Life of Marlene Dietrich*



by Donald Spoto was first released by Doubleday in 1992 and later republished by Cooper Square Press in 2000. Other examples of Dietrich's life in publication are Charlotte Chandler's *Marlene: Marlene Dietrich, A Personal Biography* (2011) from Simon and Schuster and *Marlene Dietrich, My Friend: An Intimate Biography of the Real Dietrich* (1993 and 2000) by David Bret from Robson. Dietrich also intrigues biographers who have produced more in-depth analysis of her life and times. In 2007, Duke University Press published *Dietrich Icon* which is a collection of research by a wide range of academics from varying disciplines who have explored Dietrich's life in detail. Barbara Kosta, a professor in the German Studies Department at the University of Arizona, with a PhD. from the University of California Berkeley, wrote *Willing Seduction: The Blue Angel, Marlene Dietrich, Mass Culture* (2009), and in 2011, the University of Minnesota Press re-published Steven Bach's, *Marlene Dietrich: Life and Legend*, originally published in 1992 by Morrow.<sup>60</sup>

Biographies about entertainers including Monroe, Dietrich, and other celebrities are only a small portion of biographies or biographical studies available for discussion. Many serious biographies are often published by academic presses after being written as dissertations. Recent example are Jennie Woodard's "Beauty and Double Duty: Elizabeth Hawes and the Politics of Fashion and Women's Work" at the University of Maine, Nathan B. Sanderson's "Dean of the Range: George Edward Lemmon, Open Range Cattle Ranching and the Development of the Northern Great Plains" at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lindsay Aileen Holowach Parker's "In Silence and Shadow': A Biography of Rosalie Ducrollay Jullien" at University of California, Irvine, and Kate Meehan's "Not Just a Pretty Voice: Cathy Berberian as Collaborator,

Composer, and Creator” at Washington University in St. Louis.<sup>61</sup> All of these dissertations were completed in 2011 alone. An excellent example of a scholarly biography first written as a dissertation and then published with an academic press is Glenn D. Smith’s book *“Something On My Own”: Gertrude Berg and American Broadcasting, 1929-1956*, published in 2007 by Syracuse University Press which started as “It’s Your America’: Gertrude Berg and American Broadcasting, 1929-1956,” Smith’s doctoral dissertation at the University of Southern Mississippi. Smith’s manuscript, similar to mine, was meant to restore Gertrude Berg to her rightful place among important and innovative figures in broadcasting, radio, and television.<sup>62</sup>

Scholarly biographies written in the last decade and published by academic presses vary greatly from examinations of poets, politicians, queens, and painters all the way to American entertainers. Scholarly biographies which focus on the entertainment business include Noralee Frankel’s *Stripping Gypsy: The Life of Gypsy Rose Lee* published by Oxford University Press in 2009, J. Matthew Gallman’s *America’s Joan of Arc: The Life of Anna Elizabeth Dickenson* published by Oxford University Press in 2006, Ruth Barton’s *Hedy Lamarr: The Most Beautiful Woman in Film* printed by University Press of Kentucky in 2010, and Linda Frost’s *Conjoined Twins in Black and White: The Lives of Millie-Christine McKoy and Daisy and Violet Hilton* available from the University of Wisconsin Press in 2001.<sup>63</sup> The examination of Hedy Lamarr is, in fact, part of the series titled “Screen Classics” published by the University Press of Kentucky. This series includes scholarly biographies of film legends including Jack Nicholson, Billy Wilder, and Claude Rains. This particular press also has other entertainer’s biographies published outside of their “Screen Series” such as a biographies of Peter Lorre and

Patricia Neal. The University of Mississippi Press has two series which publishes biographies of entertainers. Both the “Great Comic Artists” and “Hollywood Legend Series” focus only on biography as way of critically assessing American culture and society.

Clearly, scholarly biography is being written and published by a wide range of academic presses. This alone challenges the common misconceptions about biography’s place in academia. As cultural studies, biography is deemed worthy enough by peer reviewed academic presses to publish numerous volumes every year and is worthy enough to serve as dissertations for students in the field of Humanities.

### **Sources**

The length of Hildegarde’s life and career necessitates that this dissertation examine the span of most of the twentieth-century. Born in 1906, with her professional career beginning while she was in high school means Hildegarde worked and lived through some of the most important changes in everyday life as well as American culture and entertainment. Spending part of her childhood in New Holstein, Wisconsin, travelling primarily by horse power, Hildegarde’s lifestyle as she moved away from the countryside and to the city is indicative of the radical changes her cohorts lived through. She lived through two world wars as well as numerous other conflicts, went from horse and buggy to the streetcar to airplanes, from nickelodeons to the Golden Era of Hollywood, and from no radio to radio to television. Her experience typified much of the experiences of other Americans in the same time. Yet it is important to note that Hildegarde was not a typical representation of everyday Americans. Throughout much of

her adulthood she lived a lifestyle far apart from others. She was indeed part of a subculture which existed with and for other's enjoyment. It was a group that touched but remained far away from their audience's lives. This was a world of celebrities in which regular rules of behavior and expectations did not apply. Although they mingled with regular people, entertainers understood theirs was a world which would be unacceptable to most others, including their own families.

There are numerous important studies about popular culture as well as more specific studies about celebrity culture. It was celebrity culture in which Hildegard existed and for this reason celebrity culture studies, though not always specifically used in this study, have informed the research. What sets celebrity culture studies apart from more traditional historical investigations is the fact the area brings together a mixture of disciplines from history and sociology to psychology and anthropology. Richard Dyer's *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (1987) was one of the first celebrity culture studies. He set the tone for future work in this area. After his groundbreaking study which examined three celebrities—Marilyn Monroe, Paul Robeson, and Judy Garland—numerous popular culture celebrity studies appeared. More recent additions to this genre include *The Celebrity Culture Reader* edited by P. David Marshall (2006) and *Framing Celebrity: New Directions in Celebrity Culture* edited by Su Homes and Sean Redmond (2006). Both of these volumes offer their readers a collection of essays by various scholars of the topic. There are other volumes like this one, but the most useful one to this present study was the collection of research edited by Janet Thumim, entitled *Small Screens, Big Ideas: Television in the 1950s*. This particular book offers an array of perspectives just as the other collected volumes. Although the title indicates it is a study

of television and not necessarily celebrities, it actually offers in-depth analysis of several major celebrities and their experiences.

Outside of the celebrity studies that informed this study, there are four major archival collections which provided sources for the entirety of Hildegarde's life. Three of those are collections comprised predominately of scrapbooks compiled over the course of Hildegarde's life by either Hildegarde, her sisters, or her mother. The earliest of these scrapbooks begins in 1921 with Hildegarde's life in Milwaukee while she was a teenager. These earliest collections are housed in Marquette University's Special Collections and University Archives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Marquette University's collection, Hildegarde (Loretta Sell) Papers 1918-1996, was an excellent source of information. It contains fifty scrapbooks along with numerous additional materials including roughly seventy-years of Hildegarde's diaries (which will be discussed later). Hildegarde donated her earliest materials in her collection to Marquette, presumably due to her ties with the college after having attended its College of Music and because of Milwaukee was her hometown. What is particularly evident in those earlier scrapbooks is Hildegarde's love of the entertainment industry and her vision of her path to fame.

Another Hildegarde collection is held at the New York Public Library's Billy Rose Theater Collection in New York City. The Hildegarde Collection housed in the Fine Arts Library in Lincoln Center is comprised mainly of an assortment of magazine articles, letters both personal and private, numerous photographs, and forty-one scrapbooks. These scrapbooks cover the time period between 1936 and 1955 and are invaluable for looking deeply into Hildegarde's life while in Europe. The detailed scrapbooks from the European time-period make this collection unique. They are

remarkably well preserved and provide an in-depth chronological look at much of the time Hildegarde spent in Paris and London. Another important archive relating directly to Hildegarde's life is the American Heritage Collection at the University of Wyoming in Laramie which has a Hildegarde Papers Collection. Their Hildegarde Collection contains ten scrapbooks, numerous letters, photographs, and assorted memorabilia including numerous musical scores. The collection has a few items from the 1930s and 1940s but the majority of it concentrates in the 1950s through the early 1980s.

The fourth archival collection used for this manuscript is a repository of Anna Sosenko's papers which are located in the University Archives at Randolph-Macon College in Lynchburg, Virginia. This collection was more difficult to find as it is not listed as being held at the university. After much searching, it came to light that after Anna Sosenko died, some of her things were sold to a lawyer who in turn donated them to Randolph Macon. After the collection arrived at the university, it sat unattended until I requested access to the materials. Part of this collection comprised Anna's personal library which was quite extensive. Another portion consisted of the items left over from Anna's business that she built after she and Hildegarde were no longer together. Anna became a well-known dealer in popular culture, sold autographs, and had an extensive collection of entertainment memorabilia. Mixed in with the books, personal notes, receipts, and store catalogs is a good deal of material from her life with Hildegarde. Most importantly, Anna kept much of the correspondence between herself and Hildegarde from the time period when they split. The issue with this collection is that it is unprocessed, meaning it has not been organized, boxed, or labeled so it makes it impossible to give specifics about the location of materials cited from this archive.

These four main repositories of Hildegarde ephemera provide thousands of articles, letters, photographs, and personal belongings which would have been sufficient to recreate Hildegarde's life as a cultural study. For historians, however, the most precious of sources are the words and thoughts of their subjects and thanks to Hildegarde's diligence in keeping diaries throughout most of her life and preserving them over the years, her private thoughts, insights, and details of daily living are extant for the modern researcher. These were held after her death by her close friend and last manager, Don Dellair, who was careful to preserve them. I asked Don to donate her materials to Marquette University Archives. After meeting with him and the Department Head of the Archives and Special Collections, Matt Blessing, Don decided to allow Marquette to add these as well as other materials to Marquette's Hildegarde holdings. There are roughly seventy-years of her diaries extant. They range from July 1, 1922 when Hildegarde was sixteen years-old until December 31, 1991 when she was almost 86 years-old. Hildegarde documented her daily life for decades. She noted what she ate, where she went, trips to the grocery store as well as where she travelled, the famous people who attended her shows, and her observations on life. There are a few years missing from the collection but they are only momentary gaps in Hildegarde's narrative of her life. During the era from 1930 to 1960, only three diaries are missing: 1936, 1948, and 1958.

The collection of diaries are important for several reasons, most importantly they serve to correct the previous historical record. This is significant because part of that historical record comes from Hildegarde's autobiography which she published in 1963. In her public account of her life, *Over 50—So What!* Hildegarde provided blatantly inaccurate information, details which were clearly outside of her lived experiences. She

described herself in her book as having had two very different sides, the “Upstairs Hildegard” and the “Downstairs Hildegard.” The “downstairs” version was her public celebrity persona and the “upstairs” person was her real and intimate life. This idea is reinforced by the fact that her autobiography varies so widely from her real life. Without her diaries, it would have been difficult to ascertain the real life Hildegard kept out of the public eye. The differences in her real life as compared to her autobiography is discussed in later chapters.

An important aspect of the diaries is not simply that Hildegard documented her daily life for over seventy years, but that she read and re-read them continuously throughout her life. The diaries served as her testimony of her life and experiences but also at times became entertainment for her as well as served as an historical record. Hildegard recounted numerous times in her diaries how she and Anna sat together and read one of Hildegard’s diaries. And on at least one occasion, Hildegard used her diaries to assist in the writing of the biography of another star and someone with whom Hildegard was friends, Jacqueline Susann. Susann’s biographer, Barbara Seaman acknowledges and thanks Hildegard in the introduction of her book, *Lovely Me: The Life of Jacqueline Susann*. Hildegard sorted through all of her diaries to find anything she had written about Susann. Hildegard apparently provided excellent records for Seaman. This is clear when comparing Seaman’s writing to Hildegard’s diaries. But most importantly, Hildegard used the stories about Jacqueline Susann to illuminate Susann’s flaws while reshaping her own past, something she also did in her own autobiography. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five of this work.



All of these sources together re-create Hildegarde's lifestyle, and the culture and society in which she lived. The result is not simply a retelling of one person's life, but an examination of much of the twentieth-century and the re-establishment of the reputation of a forgotten cultural icon. It is also an examination of the fickleness of stardom and the necessity to stay current with trends lest your star begin to fade. As for Hildegarde and Anna and their relationship, though Hildegarde never specifically wrote of sexual intercourse with Anna, there is no doubt that theirs was a deep and abiding same-sex relationship which was co-dependent and dysfunctional even on their best days. Hildegarde longed to please Anna and Anna longed to control Hildegarde. Together they created and sold a glamorous, elegant star to the American public who eagerly bought it. Their split left Anna bitter and Hildegarde, a Third Order Carmelite nun. It also left Hildegarde with no one as personally invested in her as Anna and consequently without someone to make sure her star continued to burn bright as she started aging. Perhaps if she and Anna had stayed together, Hildegarde's path to stardom which she envisioned in the silent-movie theaters of Milwaukee would never have faded from American memory.

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<sup>1</sup> George Frazier, "HILDEGARDE: It Will Gross \$150,000 This Year for the Firm of Sell and Sosenko" *Life*, November 1, 1943, 69.

<sup>2</sup> Enid Nemy, "Hildegarde, Cabaret Artist, Is Dead at 99" *New York Times*, August 1, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> "Cabaret Ends; Hildegarde's Final Curtain" *The Gold Coast Bulletin*, August 3, 2005, EbscoHost Newspaper Source Plus.

<sup>4</sup> "Hildegarde; 1906-2005; Cabaret Luminary Led Single-Name Vogue Among Stars; Wisconsin Native Built a Name Worldwide and Influenced Many Others Along the Way" *Chicago Tribune*, August 1, 2006, ProQuest; Madeline Brand, "Hildegarde: 'Incomparable' Queen of the Cabaret" NPR, August 1, 2005, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4780526>; Adam Bernstein, "Cabaret Performer Hildegarde Dies at 99" *Washington Post*, August 1, 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/07/31/AR2005073100965.html>; James Auer, "Hildegarde Set A Gold Standard for Singers; Born in Wisconsin, She Captivated the World" *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, July 31, 2005, ProQuest; Christopher Hawtree, "Hildegarde: Vivacious Cabaret Singer Who Kept Entertaining Till the End" *The Guardian*, August 3, 2005,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/2005/aug/03/guardianobituaries.artsobituaries>; “Hildegarde: Elegant Star of Thirties Cabaret Known as ‘The First Lady of Supper Clubs’” *The Independent*, August 4, 2005, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/hildegarde-6143650.html>; “Hildegarde: Hildegarde was born on February 1, 1906. She Died July 29, 2005, aged 99. Glamorous Cabaret Headliner of the 1930s and 1940s” *The Times* (United Kingdom), August 1, 2005, EBSCOhost, Accession Number: 7EH1915155750.

<sup>5</sup> For example, see the previously listed obituaries from *The Independent*, *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.

<sup>6</sup> For example, see the previous listed obituaries from *The Washington Post*, *The Times* (United Kingdom), and *The Independent*.

<sup>7</sup> Enid Nemy, “Hildegarde Influential Cabaret Headliner, Is Dead at 99” *New York Times*, August 1, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Merkin and Annie Liebowitz, “Sophisticated Ladies” *Vanity Fair*, June 1998.

<sup>9</sup> Kristine H. Burns, Ed. *Women and Music in America Since 1900* (Greenwood Press: Westport Connecticut, 2002), viii.

<sup>10</sup> Dorothy Marcic, *Respect: Women and Popular Music* (New York City: Texere, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*; Carolyn Kitch, *The Girl on the Magazine Cover: The Origins of Visual Stereotypes in American Mass Media* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> There are numerous advertisements and performance reviews about this European period of Hildegarde’s career found in Scrapbook 8, Hildegarde (Loretta Sell) Papers, Marquette University, Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Milwaukee, Wisconsin (hereafter cited as HLS Papers, MU); Anna Sosenko, “Jazz Defended,” unnamed magazine, January 1934, Scrapbook 8, HLS Papers, MU.

<sup>13</sup> Frazier, “HILDEGARDE.”

<sup>14</sup> For an example, see: “Hildegarde” *Star*, Tucson, Arizona, Scrapbook 10, Box 5, HLS Papers, MU.

<sup>15</sup> This language is used in numerous newspaper articles about Hildegarde. For examples in Scrapbook 10, HLS Papers, MU, see: *Star*, Tucson, Arizona; *Brooklyn Eagle*; *Chicago Tribune*.

<sup>16</sup> David Kapp to Anna Sosenko, August 21, 1944, Folder 2, Box 1, Hildegarde Sell Collection, Billy Rose Theater Collection, New York Public Library, New York City, New York (hereafter cited as HSC BRTC NYPL).

<sup>17</sup> Script “Chats Across the Table,” Hosted by Kay Ashton Stevens, January 17, 1943, Folder 4, Box 3, *ibid*.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>19</sup> Marjory Adams, “Hildegarde, in Boston, Made Axis Hate Her Rendition of ‘Paris’ Song” *Boston Daily Globe*, August 12, 1942, Scrapbook 11, HLS Papers, MU.

<sup>20</sup> Cover of *Billboard*, January 9, 1943; Advertisement, “HILDEGARDE: America’s No. 1 Female Personality” *Billboard*, May 19, 1945. This advertisement appeared on two pages and reprinted an article about the new Hooperatings which appeared the previous week in *Billboard*.

<sup>21</sup> “Crosby and Hildegarde Lead Tab” *Billboard*, May 12, 1945.

<sup>22</sup> Unnamed newspaper, November 4, 1945, Envelope, Scrapbooks, HSC BRTC NYPL. Ratings for her radio program can also be found in Scrapbook 11, HLS Papers, MU.

<sup>23</sup> John Dunning, *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 75, 508, 319-320.

<sup>24</sup> This information appears in different articles which are accessible online, including one which encourages readers to listen to forgotten music and artists. This website featured Hildegarde in 2003. “Rediscovered Talent: The Incomparable Hildegarde” <http://www.musicbizadvice.com/hildegarde.htm>

<sup>25</sup> Curtis Gathje, *At The Plaza: An Illustrated History of the World’s Most Famous Hotel* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 71.

<sup>26</sup> “Café Life in New York, More About Hildegarde and Her Magic at the Savoy-Plaza Café Lounge” unnamed newspaper, Scrapbook 11, HLS Papers, MU.

<sup>27</sup> “Hildegarde Gowns At Plaza Striking” *New York Times*, May 3, 1944, Scrapbook 11, *ibid*.

<sup>28</sup> *New York Herald Tribune*, March 24, 1940, Scrapbook 11, *ibid*.

<sup>29</sup> Robert W. Dana, unnamed New York newspaper, from late 1940s. Scrapbook 13, *ibid*.

- ibid.
- <sup>30</sup> Virginia Forbes, "Café Life in New York: Hildegard is Still the Enchantress" Scrapbook 13, ibid.
- <sup>31</sup> This article, as it appeared in several papers, is in Scrapbook 31, ibid.
- <sup>32</sup> Art Spooner, "The Show Must Go On" *The Pointer*, February 9, 1951, Scrapbook 23, ibid.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>34</sup> And example can be found in *Variety*, December 5, 1951, with an advertisement for a three-month engagement in the Cotillion Room in the Hotel Pierre, New York City. Scrapbook 17, HLS Papers, MU.
- <sup>35</sup> Frazier, "HILDEGARDE."
- <sup>36</sup> As quoted by Don Dellair, Hildegard's last manager, interviewed by Monica S. Gallamore, September 8, 2008.
- <sup>37</sup> Lola Clare Bratten, "Nothin' Could Be Finah: The Dinah Shore Chevy Show" in *Small Screens, Big Ideas: Television in the 1950s*, ed. Janet Thumim (New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2002), 102.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid; Hildegard saved a newspaper article which has two photographs, one of Hildegard, one of Dinah Shore. The photograph shows clearly that Dinah Shore's "look" was modeled on Hildegard. "Stars Reach High" *Chicago Daily News*, August 15, 1957, Scrapbook 29, HLS Papers, MU. For examples of Hildegard's advice to women, see: Sara Sutton, "Hildegard Outlines Daily Exercise Program For Keeping Throat Line Smooth and Young" *New York Herald*, November 11, 1942, Volume 8, HSC BRTC NYPL; "Should Hair Be Up or Down? She Says Both" appeared in several newspapers and is chronicled in Volume 6, HSC BRTC NYPL.
- <sup>39</sup> John Bush Jones, *The Songs that Fought the War: Popular Music and the Home Front, 1939-1945* (Lebanon, N.H.: Brandeis University Press, 2006), 84-85.
- <sup>40</sup> Ken Bloom, *The American Songbook: The Singers, Songwriters, and the Songs* (New York: Black Dog and Leventhal Publishers, Inc., 2005), 291.
- <sup>41</sup> David Nasaw, "AHR Roundtable: Historians and Biography Introduction" *American Historical Review*, (June 2009), 573-578.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>43</sup> Lois W. Banner, "AHR Roundtable: Biography as History" *American Historical Review*, (June 2009), 579-586.
- <sup>44</sup> Gerda Lerner, "Abolitionists From South Carolina: A life of Sarah and Angeline Grimké" (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1066). Gerda Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters From South Carolina: Rebels Against Slavery* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967).
- <sup>45</sup> Gordon W. Knight, "General Edward Forester (1830-1901): Correcting the Biography of an Inveterate Liar" (paper presented at Popular culture/American Culture national conference, St. Louis, Missouri, April 2010).
- <sup>46</sup> Susie Skarl, "Four Guys, Four Different Versions: Setting the Record Straight on Jersey Boys and Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons" (paper presented at Popular Culture/American Culture national conference, St. Louis, Missouri, April 2010).
- <sup>47</sup> Catherine Strong, "Grunge, Riot Grrrl and the Forgetting of Women in Popular Culture" *Journal of Popular Culture* 44, no. 2, (2011), 398-416.
- <sup>48</sup> Jennifer Terry, "'Momism' and the Making of Treasonous Homosexuals" in *Bad Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America*, eds. Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 169-190.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid, 170.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid, 170-175.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid, 170.
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid, 174.
- <sup>53</sup> Jack Gaver, "Some Stars Still Aloof From Video" *Beaver Valley Times* November 10, 1953. This article was carried on the UPI wire. Google News Archive.
- <sup>54</sup> Alice Hughes, "A Woman's New York" June 21 1949, carried in various newspapers through the King Press Syndicates, Incorporated. Google News Archive.
- <sup>55</sup> Diane Negra, "Hedy Lamarr's Post-War Star Textuality" in *Small Screens, Big Ideas: Television in the 1950s*, ed. Janet Thumim (New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2002), 105-117.
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid, 109.

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<sup>57</sup> Robert. K. Merton, *Mass Persuasion: The Social Psychology of a War Bond Drive* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1946), 146.

<sup>58</sup> Sarah Bartlett Churchwell, *The Many Lives of Marilyn Monroe* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2005); Barbara Leaming, *Marilyn Monroe* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1998); Donald Spoto, *Marilyn Monroe: The Biography* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993; New York: Cooper Square Press, 2001).

<sup>59</sup> S. Paige Baty, *American Monroe: The Making of a Body Politic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Clara Junker, *Circling Marilyn: Text, Body, Performance* (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2010); Lois Banner, *MM-Personal: from the Private Archive of Marilyn Monroe* (New York: Abrams, 2011).

<sup>60</sup> Donald Spoto, *Blue Angel: The Life of Marlene Dietrich* (New York: Doubleday, 1992; New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000); Charlotte Chandler, *Marlene: Marlene Dietrich, A Personal Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011); David Bret, *Marlene Dietrich, My Friend: An Intimate Biography of the Real Dietrich* (London: Robson Books, 2000); Gerd Gemünden and Mary Desjardins, eds., *Dietrich Icon* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Barbara Kosta, *Willing Seduction: The Blue Angel, Marlene Dietrich, and Mass Culture* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009); Steven Bach, *Marlene Dietrich: Life and Legend* (New York: Morrow, 1992; St. Paul: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

<sup>61</sup> Jennie Woodard, "Beauty and Double Duty: Elizabeth Hawes and the Politics of Fashion and Women's Work" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Maine, 2011); Nathan B. Sanderson, "Dean of the Range: George Edward Lemmon, Open Range Cattle Ranching and the Development of the Northern Great Plains" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2011); Lindsay Aileen Holowach Parker "'In Silence and Shadow': A Biography of Rosalie Ducrollay Jullien" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Irvine, 2011); Kate Meehan, "Not Just a Pretty Voice: Cathy Berberian as Collaborator, Composer, and Creator" (Ph.D. dissertation, Washington University in St. Louis, 2011).

<sup>62</sup> Glenn D. Smith, *"Something on My Own": Gertrude Berg and American Broadcasting, 1929-1956* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007); Glenn Delton Smith, Jr., "'It's Your America': Gertrude Berg and American Broadcasting, 1929-1956" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern Mississippi, 2004).

<sup>63</sup> Noralee Frankel, *Stripping Gypsy: The Life of Gypsy Rose Lee* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); J. Matthew Gallman, *America's Joan of Arc: The Life of Anna Elizabeth Dickenson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Linda Frost, *Conjoined Twins in Black and White: The Lives of Millie-Christine McKoy and Daisy and Violet Hilton* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001).

## Chapter One

### The Mysterious and Exotic European Chanteuse from Adell, Wisconsin

50 perfectly good dollars shot to hell.<sup>1</sup>

I could be the best accompanist in Mil. If only I'd work.<sup>2</sup>

As early as 1931, most of the publicity about Hildegarde focused on her mysterious nationality. Article after article spoke of the German, Scandinavian, French, or Dutch songstress captivating audiences on the vaudeville stage. Often the news stories were accompanied with varying degrees of lies to draw in the reader, because after all he/she was a potential ticket buyer for the “Gus Edwards Review” in which Hildegarde, “the most important theatrical find in years,” was then performing.<sup>3</sup> Apparently Hildegarde was a “German Invader” while performing in Toledo, Ohio, and “a Scandinavian young woman” in Baltimore, and when she appeared in the national spotlight, a “Dutch dialect comedienne with a pretty face” in *Variety*.<sup>4</sup> Her story varied so greatly that *Radio N.B.C.* billed her as “recently arrived in this country” in one edition and as having arrived in the United States “when 6 years old” in another.<sup>5</sup> Thankfully according the *Radio N.B.C.*, she “kept up with her German” enough that many articles reported she mixed up her English and native tongue when speaking and when singing.<sup>6</sup> The mystery surrounding her heritage and accent continued until the early 1940s.

In truth Hildegarde was born on February 1, 1906 in Adell, Wisconsin. When she was young, her parents moved the family to New Holstein, Wisconsin, and finally in 1921, relocated to Milwaukee, reportedly to further Hildegarde’s musical study. Her “exotic” sound was simply her leftover regional accent. Only Milwaukee newspapers

understood her gimmick and openly reported she was exploiting her accent as part of the show.<sup>7</sup> Hildegard wrote later in her autobiography, *Over 50! So What*, that the German accent was the innovation of Gus Edwards, one of the best known producers of vaudeville acts.<sup>8</sup> This exotic label and her mysterious accent was something that her manager Anna Sosenko accentuated later and further solidified Hildegard as different from other singers and pianists of the era. Eventually, Hildegard, Anna, and the public embraced Hildegard's roots in Milwaukee and she became "The Chantoosie from Milwaukee" as well as "The Dear Who Made Milwaukee Famous," a play on the well known Schlitz Beer slogan. While Hildegard resided in Milwaukee for a relatively short period of time (from the point when she was fifteen until roughly when she was nineteen), she regarded Milwaukee as her hometown and was always very proud of her Cream City roots.

The life-style of Hildegard and her family during her formative years was representative of American culture in the early twentieth-century. Her father owned a small grocery store in New Holstein, and in keeping with the times of the 1920s, picked his family up and moved to a large urban area. Their lives in Milwaukee were emblematic of other middling sorts in urban centers throughout the country. In Milwaukee, the Sell family owned a grocery located in the front and ground floor of their residence; they were consummate consumers; they used the Milwaukee streetcars to navigate the city on a daily basis in order to shop and engage in entertainment; and they even indulged in luxury items such as kid gloves and a vacuum cleaner.<sup>9</sup> The Sell family was in effect, the ultimate middle-class family in the 1920s, replete with teenagers who

were pushing the limits of modernity while keeping family and religious obligations on the side.

The Sells were part and parcel of the changes sweeping the nation in the first three decades of the twentieth-century. America changed both politically and socially in the time period from Hildegarde's birth in 1906 to the time she left Milwaukee to travel the vaudeville circuit in 1926. The United States was firmly entrenched in the Progressive Era in 1906 with Theodore Roosevelt as president and the settlement house movement well-established in urban areas across the nation. Progressives worked on the local and national level, and sought to reform both government and society. Progressives focused on urban areas which were overcrowded due to immigration as well as the migration of Americans from rural to urban areas in the early part of the twentieth century. Rapidly industrializing cities drew new immigrants and rural Americans including African Americans into the urban sphere to work. Milwaukee exemplified this new social order in particular because of its growing manufacturing industry which helped make it the twelfth largest city in the United States in 1910.<sup>10</sup> The Sell family was part of this urban migration, and part of the new and growing ethnic middle-class.

The political and social climate was very different by 1926. The United States had stepped away from its isolationism and participated in a world war, and emerged not only a victor but also as a burgeoning world power. The Progressivism that swept the country only a few years before was replaced with a distinctive shift to the right with the conservative presidencies of Warren G. Harding and Calvin Coolidge. A strong surge of xenophobia influenced immigration policy. New restrictions were in effect that limited the number of new arrivals from the perceived "undesirable" areas of Europe.

Milwaukee, it seemed, was the only city impervious to the right-leaning national politics of the 1920s and remained a strong Socialist enclave during the nation's new right turn.

For Hildegard in this period almost none of this mattered. For some young women at this time, the most important change taking place involved fashions and the rapidly evolving entertainment industry. Yes, women gained the vote in 1920, but for teenagers the most important aspect of life was their emerging roles as consumers and the new technologies that changed their leisure time. Movies had moved from the nickelodeon theaters housed in storefronts with basic accommodations to ornate "movie palaces" with bright lights, beautiful furnishings, and large orchestras.<sup>11</sup> These new flamboyant theaters were numerous in Milwaukee and were exemplified by the Wisconsin Theater and the Egyptian, both of which opened in the 1920s.<sup>12</sup> The new venues were accompanied by a change in audiences because the new movie palaces tended to attract middle and upper middle class attendees instead of the working-class who preferred the nickelodeons and cheaper movie houses.<sup>13</sup> As movie theaters transformed to urbane leisure spaces, the radio also revolutionized the way Americans thought about and experienced entertainment. Radio rose from obscurity in the early 1900s to the most accessible form of entertainment as well as information for the majority of American households. By the end of the 1920s, more than one third of all households in southern Wisconsin had radios in their homes.<sup>14</sup> These modernizations in leisure and popular culture were particularly important for Hildegard and many of her cohorts.

Hildegard kept prolific records of her personal experiences and career from her teens throughout the majority of her life. In 1963, she published an autobiography. Also



extant are a large collection of her diaries which ostensibly begin on July 1, 1922 and scrapbooks which begin in 1921.<sup>15</sup> The autobiography, published in 1963, contains some information about life in New Holstein and great detail about her life in Milwaukee. Her diaries chronicle her daily activities in Milwaukee and are rich with detail about her life as well as the comings and goings of her family. There are numerous discrepancies, though, between her published account of her life and her private remembrances in the diaries. Much of what Hildegard describes in the book about her life in Milwaukee in particular differs greatly with the realities of her adolescent experiences in Milwaukee as recounted in the diaries. The inconsistency between Hildegard's published memories and her apparent lived experiences was possibly rooted in her desire to present a certain version of her past as part of her persona, thus continuing the pattern from her early career of creating a stage identity to be sold to the public. Another explanation is that she later remembered her Milwaukee youth as impoverished and as a difficult experience even though her own written record shows a middle-class family with an expendable income. It is true that memory is a version of lived experiences and revising the past is a way in which individuals reconcile shame or guilt over things that happened to their families or groups but not necessarily to them personally.<sup>16</sup> The fact that Hildegard preserved her diaries until her death in 2005 at the age of ninety-nine—and obviously read and re-read them—means that the alterations to her public life story were most likely intentional.<sup>17</sup>

Both of the versions of Hildegard's early life through her autobiography and her diaries are entertaining and informative. Her diaries for this period start when she was sixteen-years old and continue until November 1925 when Hildegard was nineteen and a

student at the Marquette University's College of Music. Unfortunately, the diary from 1926 is currently missing and that was the year she quit Marquette and left Milwaukee to travel with the vaudeville act "Gerry and Her Baby Grands." What is apparent from the evidence is that Hildegard's time in Milwaukee leaves no doubt that her focus, as early as her teen years, was toward music and performing. She loved the stage, loved playing professionally, and tired easily of most activity that did not relate to her musical study or performances. Nothing swayed her from what she wanted to do, not even school detention, repeatedly getting kicked out of classes, or scoldings from her mother. Her persistence, musical talent, and modernity drove her from a high brow experience at the Marquette University Conservatory of Music to the vaudeville stage which was a far cry from her beginnings as a grocer's daughter in New Holstein, Wisconsin.

### **Growing Up in New Holstein**

Hildegard Loretta Sell was born on February 1, 1906 in Adell, Wisconsin.<sup>18</sup> She was the oldest of three sisters. Her middle sister Germaine (also known as Jane) was a year and a half younger than Hildegard and her youngest sister, Beatrice known as Honey, was five years younger. Both her mother, Ida Jermain Sell, and her father, Charles F. Sell, came from immigrant families and both were the first generation of their families born in the United States. They came from rural areas of Wisconsin, she from a farm in Manitowoc County and he from a farm in New Holstein. Their similarities end there. While they ascended together as a married couple to middle class status as indicated by their family business and their avid consumerism in the 1920s, Ida apparently came from an affluent family. Her brothers and sisters ascended into a higher

and more respected social standing than Ida and Charles as well Charles' extended family. According to Hildegard's autobiography, the prosperity of Ida's family led to a consciousness of class division in her household.<sup>19</sup>

Charles' family was from New Holstein, Wisconsin, an area founded in 1848 by immigrants from the Schleswig-Holstein region of Germany.<sup>20</sup> New Holstein was a farming region which had a population of around 500 when Charles and many of his roughly twelve brothers and sisters were born.<sup>21</sup> Charles' mother, Margaretha Wollenburg, at twenty-years old emigrated from Schleswig with her brother and within two years of arriving in New Holstein, married Juergen Sell. Margaretha was Juergen's second wife, and as often was the case with second wives, she inherited his children from his first marriage. This farm family was large and included assorted full and partially related siblings as well as adopted children. Most of Charles' family carried on in the tradition of farming and most remained in New Holstein. Some of the Sell family moved west to the Dakotas and Iowa, and at least two brothers, Charles and Herman, opened a grocery and a harness store respectively. Martha, the adopted sister of Charles, was a teacher and taught high school in Madison for thirty years. She was the only professional in Charles' family. Charles' mother and several other family members were active in St John's Evangelical and Reformed Church which started as a Lutheran Church and slowly changed over time to become part of the United Church of Christ. His mother was very active in her faith and was a founder of St. John's *Frauen Verein* (the equivalent of a women's guild or women's organization).<sup>22</sup>

Ida Jermain's family was very different. She and her brothers and sisters were from Meeme, Wisconsin, in Manitowoc County. This area, like New Holstein, was

comprised predominantly of German families. The Jermaines, however, were active Roman Catholics and settled in an area with other Catholics. Ida's maternal grandfather emigrated to Manitowoc County from Aix-La-Chapelle (Aachen in modern day Germany) in 1845. He was a farmer. Her paternal grandfather was a man of standing in Berne, Switzerland. His son (Ida's father) immigrated to Wisconsin when he was fifteen years old, and in addition to farming, built mills. He reputedly built a considerable number of the mills in the region of Wisconsin where he lived.<sup>23</sup> He and his wife had ten children. Several of them had prosperous lives and became well known in their communities. One of the brothers became the general manager of the Otis Elevator Company in Rochester, Minnesota.<sup>24</sup> Two brothers, Hubert and Louis, became well known physicians. Both Hubert and Louis also taught school for a few years in their home town of Meeme.<sup>25</sup> Louis had a higher social standing and was highly regarded in Milwaukee. He practiced medicine and became part of the faculty at the Wisconsin College of Physicians.<sup>26</sup> He eventually approached Marquette University as a representative of several well known physicians, proposing that his group support a medical school with university ties.<sup>27</sup> This was due to major issues with the other two, non-university affiliated medical schools in Milwaukee. He was instrumental in merging the Wisconsin College of Physicians with Marquette and became the first Dean of the Marquette University Medical School.<sup>28</sup> It was Louis—and his prosperity in particular—which (according to Hildegard in her autobiography) stirred feelings of inadequacy and inferiority in her household that started with her parents and trickled down to her.<sup>29</sup>

The Jermain and Sell families merged in the marriage of Ida and Charles in April of 1905.<sup>30</sup> For a short while at least, they lived in Adell but eventually moved to New

Holstein where they owned a general store. Charles Sell's store was a typical general store in a small town. The store sold a variety of goods from vinegar and canned goods to tobacco and cigars. In addition to selling the usual grocery fare, it was also an ice cream parlor and confectionary. According to Hildegarde, the store was the first place in town to sell ice cream as well as the first place to have a soda fountain. She described the fountain as having a tank they manually rocked on a rocking chair to create carbonation.<sup>31</sup> Confections were an important product in the store and had equal billing on their store sign along with regular items like groceries.<sup>32</sup> Hildegarde also claimed they had the first peanut roaster in town, and that during town festivals and celebrations, Charles put the roaster out in front of their store on main street and sold freshly roasted peanuts. Near Charles' store was his brother Herman's harness shop. At the harness shop, Hildegarde would hide to eat the candy she bought from her father's competitor with her nickel per week allowance.<sup>33</sup> Herman's relationship with Hildegarde and her sisters speaks to the close family ties Charles and Ida maintained with Charles' extended family. Apparently, Herman enhanced the weekly allowance of Hildegarde and her sisters on Sundays with an extra nickel and cautioned the girls frequently about being careful crossing the streets.<sup>34</sup>

Hildegarde's remembrances in her autobiography reflect warm feelings for her father's side of the family. They provided a large and loving German family for her and her sisters. Her mother's side of the family as portrayed in her autobiography, however, was a source of anger and irritation for her and for her parents. She recalled in her book that Ida and Charles felt second-rate around her mother's family because Ida's family were all people of substance. Hildegarde wrote that her mother felt inferior to her

biological family, especially her brother Louis and his wife Rose. Ida lamented not being invited to the lavish parties thrown by Louis and Rose in their beautiful home and always commented that it was probably for the best anyway since she did not have appropriate clothing to wear to such formal events. To prove her point, Hildegarde told a story about a visit of this aunt and uncle to New Holstein when she was eleven years old. During their visit, she remembered being angry at her relatives. This was because Ida and Charles had spoken poorly about Louis and Rose in front of Hildegarde and her sisters. She related how her aunt Rose brought a bag of rags for the girls to divide so they could make clothes for their dolls. Hildegarde was insulted to be given second hand rags and refused to take them. One of the most important things about this visit is, according to Hildegarde, Louis and Rose parked their limousine out in front of the house where everyone could see. The “long black automobile” parked in front of their home and store was, for Hildegarde, an embarrassment.<sup>35</sup> She also related that because her family was poor and her mother’s family were doctors and “people of substance,” they were not interested in having a relationship with Ida and Charles.<sup>36</sup>

There are many problems with this particular story and with Hildegarde’s recollection of the relationship between her family and the Jermaines. The picture of a “long black automobile” evokes a modern connotation of limousines. The automobiles of this era all looked remarkably similar and limousines were different only because they had a divided compartment to separate the driver from the passengers.<sup>37</sup> Almost certainly, in New Holstein at this time any automobile would have attracted attention. Either the relations between Louis and Rose and Charles and Ida improved when they moved to Milwaukee or they were not strained in the first place. Once the Sell family

moved to Milwaukee, the families had a cordial relationship that included Louis and Rose dropping by unannounced, visiting, and staying for dinner, wine, and dancing.<sup>38</sup>

It seems as well that Ida and Charles were not poor or considered poor when they lived in New Holstein. Small communities like New Holstein were rife with class issues and class structures which affected respectability and social standing. The way families lived, such as location of residence and their home décor, contributed to a family's standing in their community. Earnings and possessions impacted reputation as did the lineage and social standing of an extended family. Another important factor was family participation in community activities which included involvement in politics as well as church organizations.<sup>39</sup> With these social criteria in mind, Charles and Ida were not extremely poor, nor at the bottom of the local class structure. A grocer would certainly not fit into the upper echelon of society, but they would not be perceived as deprived by the community either. Even if Charles' store did not have the first soda fountain and was not the first ice cream shop in town, his various enterprises provided enough business to support his family, buy toys, and provide a weekly allowance for his children. Both the Sell and Jermain families were active in their communities. In addition, many of Charles' siblings were well respected, such as his sister who spent her life teaching as well as his brother who owned the harness store in New Holstein, an invaluable service in a farming community. The Jermain family was equally involved in their community as teachers and in church. These activities of family and extended kin all contributed to the status of Charles and Ida in their town. Certainly they did not live in a large beautiful home on Lake Park Drive in Milwaukee, like Louis and Rose, but they were not in the poor house either.

If the Sell family was judged solely on their own household, their level of consumerism suggests that the family was not living in poverty and would not have been perceived as poor by the New Holstein community. Charles had enough business that they could afford the purchase of living room furniture from a Sears and Roebuck catalog in the 1910s. The Sell household also owned a piano, which was no small expense in the time period, and was the means by which Ida gave Hildegard piano lessons at home. Having a piano in this time was a status symbol and substantiated the quest of a family or individual to stay on the cutting edge of social trends.<sup>40</sup> Pianos became extremely popular in this era and numerous companies used new industrialized methods to mass produce their products. They sold these instrument by any means possible everywhere possible.<sup>41</sup> This included selling through mail order catalogs such as Sears and Roebuck and Montgomery Ward as well as to department stores such as Wanamaker's. Amazingly, travelling salesmen loaded pianos onto wagons and took them to farming communities.<sup>42</sup> There is little doubt that the community of New Holstein knew what the Sell family owned and about their lifestyle, especially in light of their dwelling being connected to their general store on main street. While the household may not have been wealthy, the Sells were able to accumulate enough money to join the trend towards urbanization and open another store in Milwaukee during the depression of 1921.

### **The Material Girl in Milwaukee**

Charles and Ida moved their family to Milwaukee on July 17, 1921.<sup>43</sup> Their new home and store were located at 5444 Vliet Street on the southwestern section of the Washington Heights neighborhood at the cross section of Vliet St. and Hawley Road.<sup>44</sup>



The Washington Heights area emerged in the nineteenth-century along a streetcar line travelling west of town and in the vicinity of Washington Park.<sup>45</sup> Washington Park, designed by Frederick Law Olmstead and replete with a zoo, was a popular leisure destination for Milwaukee residents in the 1890s. Between 1910 and 1930, the area on the west side of the park was in a state of rapid development.<sup>46</sup> The building boom in Washington Heights lured middle and upper class German families to settle around the park. Some of the new residents were well known families in Milwaukee business including Arthur and William Davidson of Harley-Davidson fame.<sup>47</sup> Many wealthy Milwaukee families in this time period migrated away from the center of the city and into the newer prosperous neighborhoods like Washington Heights and Washington Highlands.<sup>48</sup> Houses built in this era continue to be known as classic examples of “Arts and Crafts” homes and are valued for such amenities as hardwood floors and numerous other highly sought after architectural details.<sup>49</sup>

In her autobiography, Hildegard characterized her neighborhood in Milwaukee as a “sparse community,” and insisted that their house and store were across from the “city dump” which led to the odor of garbage wafting throughout their space.<sup>50</sup> This is unlikely due to the social standing of residents in the neighborhood not to mention that starting in 1902 Milwaukee began burning the majority of the city’s garbage.<sup>51</sup> By the early 1920s, in fact, Milwaukee’s “sewer socialists” created a new bureau to handle garbage in the city and implemented new trash removal to collect city trash and transport it to the incinerator.<sup>52</sup> Hildy’s descriptions of this neighborhood in the autobiography, as well as of her life and the life of her family once they moved to Milwaukee, are difficult to reconcile with her account of her life as she lived it in her diaries. In her

autobiography, she asserted that the poverty she and her family experienced in Milwaukee was unbearable and insisted they often ate meatless meals to compensate for a lack of money. She also misrepresented how and when she worked in a department store, how her money was used, how she began working at the Lyric Theater, how much she was paid for working in Milwaukee movie theaters and how she dressed. Hildegard and her family were the ultimate consumers of 1920s America. They bought household appliances, musical instruments, and encyclopedias as well as frequented movies and ate at restaurants. Individually, Hildegard engaged in numerous leisure activities throughout high school and her college days at Marquette. The poor rarely participated in events such as boating, tennis, golf, swimming indoor during the winter, and indoor ice skating during the summer at the newly opened Castle Ice Gardens.<sup>53</sup>

The reasons that drove Ida and Charles to open a new store in Milwaukee are unknown. Many others were making that same move to urban areas such as Milwaukee in this time period. Hildegard suggested the family moved at her mother's insistence because Milwaukee offered better access to more substantial musical instruction for Hildegard and her sisters. All of the Sell girls became adept musicians due to the instruction available in Milwaukee. Their musical training was very important to Ida and Charles. Whatever the reasons, the Sell's move placed the family to Milwaukee at the beginning of an era the city's socialist Mayor Daniel Hoan characterized as a "golden age of progress."<sup>54</sup> The year 1921 was a year of economic depression, but Milwaukee improved quickly and by the end of 1922, it had recovered. The local economy was growing again.<sup>55</sup> Milwaukee's population was increasing during this era as well. In 1920, the total population of Milwaukee was 457,147 and by 1930 the city had grown to

578,249.<sup>56</sup> Some of the growth of Milwaukee in the 1920s is attributable to immigration but most of the growth stemmed from the urban migration happening across the country. By 1930, only nineteen percent of Milwaukee's population was foreign born as compared to twenty-four percent in 1920.<sup>57</sup> African Americans migrated into Milwaukee in the 1920s as did many other Americans including rural families like the Sells.

Charles and Ida relocated to a growing neighborhood and opened their store in the shopping district for that area. In 1921, Vliet Street was, and remains today, the main location for commercial establishments in the residential Washington Heights neighborhood.<sup>58</sup> The Sell house was large and accommodated the five-person family easily. Their house was one of the roughly 35 percent of Milwaukee homes (and one-third of homes nationwide) with electricity.<sup>59</sup> The family enjoyed the conveniences that came with having an electrified home. In the summer when the weather was very hot, they used their electric fans to be comfortable enough to sleep. For Christmas in 1922, Ida's gift from the family was a vacuum cleaner, presumably from a mail order catalog.<sup>60</sup> This was a significant gift for this time period. Middle-class women of the 1920s saw housework as a manifestation of their devotion to home and family instead of drudgery relegated to servants.<sup>61</sup> In a household that worked to maintain a particular standard of living as the Sells did the vacuum cleaner was a very practical item to have in the home. It is difficult to imagine that these heavy machines could be perceived as practical but with their ability to be wheeled around, the perception was that they transformed housework for women.<sup>62</sup> Vacuum cleaners were also costly additions to the household. Sears and Roebuck sold Energex, their own brand of electric vacuum cleaners starting at \$34.75 in 1922.<sup>63</sup> That is the equivalent of \$447.15 in 2009.<sup>64</sup> Even if the family opted

to buy Ida the non-electric version of the Sears and Roebuck vacuum cleaner in 1922, it cost \$19.75 (comparable to \$254.14 in today's market). Either way this was a substantial gift.

The Sell family expenses were not limited to the occasional purchase of household appliances. Once in Milwaukee, instead of sending their daughters to the local public school, Charles and Ida opted to enroll them at Roman Catholic parochial schools where they paid for books as well as the tuition which cost \$50 per child per school year.<sup>65</sup> Hildegarde and Germaine attended St. John's Cathedral High School located in downtown Milwaukee at the corner of Jackson and Wells Streets which necessitated riding the streetcar almost daily from the western part of Milwaukee County to the downtown area. Hildegarde noted in her autobiography that she and her sister both took jobs in order to help defray the costs of their education. This was the reason she worked at Gimbel Brothers Department Store and started playing piano for silent films at the Lyric Theater in Milwaukee.<sup>66</sup> According to Hildegarde, Ida "must have been desperate" to approach the manager at the Lyric to get Hildegarde an audition, but this was something for which Hildegarde was grateful because she would "much rather work in a movie theater than in Gimbels."<sup>67</sup> This scenario was not completely truthful. In actuality, Hildegarde played piano in movie theaters for a full year *before* she started working for Gimbel's Department Store. It is true that she would much rather have played music for films than work in a notion's department, but that was the truth about all of her high school years: she was only interested in learning, performing, and playing music.

Hildegarde's first extant diary begins on July 1 and 2, 1922 with the entry, "Sat. and Sun were my first days of playing piano at the Lyric Theater."<sup>68</sup> For her first few weeks, she played piano on the weekends, usually two shows a day but eventually she began playing almost every night of the week.<sup>69</sup> By 1922, movie theaters had progressed from the nickelodeons where working-class patrons gathered for leisure into elaborate "movie palaces" with beautiful and ornate décor and a higher class patronage.<sup>70</sup> Movie theaters employed musicians to play along with the silent films. The music varied from small groups of musicians to orchestras to solo performers. Often, theaters employed vaudeville acts to perform in addition to the film showings and those performances also used the musicians employed at the theater. Some of the music was very good and some was sub-par, but it says a great deal about Hildegarde's musical abilities that she began playing professionally at sixteen years of age. She does not mention in her 1922 diary how she became employed at the Lyric Theater located at 3804 W. Vliet Street, a few blocks from her home, but her father had many musical connections in Milwaukee. He most likely helped her with the Lyric position as well.

Although an avid reader, Hildegarde was not particularly interested in high school. Throughout her last two years of schooling, she and many other young women like her frequently focused on socializing and leisure activities rather than serious studying. With both her parents working at the store, Hildegarde was often free from the close scrutiny of her parents and lived with a great deal of freedom. In many ways, Hildegarde and her cohorts embodied the stereotypical lifestyle of the flapper and new woman of the 1920s. The stereotypes of the New Woman as middle class youth who, with a modern sense of morality, attended college and worked with less control from

parents, was a reality for Hildegarde.<sup>71</sup> It is important to note, Hildegarde did not consider herself a flapper. In one of her scrapbooks from high school, she had numerous photographs she had taken of her friends with her personal camera. She was careful to add a caption to one of the pictures and label her friends in that particular photograph as “flapper girls.”<sup>72</sup> The young women in that photo were distinctively dressed and were visibly different from Hildegarde’s look. The “flappers” wore different clothes; all had men’s hats and one wore a man’s tie and collared shirt. This indicates that in order to be called a flapper, there was a criteria those girls met that Hildegarde and her other friends clearly did not.

Even though Hildegarde was not a flapper, she embodied the modern ideals and morals of the New Woman. The New Woman emerged during this decade in the popular media and movies. This attracted middle class young women and reinforced the image.<sup>73</sup> It is evident that Hildegarde saw herself as leaving behind the old traditional ways and embracing her modernity, especially in contrast to her interpretation of her sister Germaine who was in the same class as Hildegarde and whose school work Hildegarde copied. The differences between the sisters was unmistakable. Germaine adhered closely to the expectations of home and school. Once she “squealed” on Hildegarde for copying in English class. Another time, when they both visited a friend whose parents were not home, Hildegarde considered their un-chaperoned visit great fun, yet she found Germaine’s behavior to be too old fashioned and characterized her as “acting like an old grandma.”<sup>74</sup> So while Hildegarde, with her modern bobbed hair and makeup, did not see herself as a flapper, she certainly defined herself as a modern woman who embraced new attitudes about life as they pertained to dating and authority.<sup>75</sup>

Attending a private Catholic school had no bearing on Hildegarde's utter disregard for her studies or for the authority of the nuns and others who taught her. Her idea of a good day in high school was a day spent eating candy during chemistry and sitting talking with friends through classes.<sup>76</sup> While she maintained pleasant relationships with some of the nuns, her life at school played out more as a series of battles with one instructor or another. Her view of schooling was clear with her opinion of the cost of tuition for St. John's Cathedral High School when she wrote in her scrapbook: "50 perfectly good dollars shot to hell."<sup>77</sup> It was not necessary for Germaine to "squeal" on Hildegarde for cheating because Hildegarde was caught on numerous occasions and cared little that her work and the work of her co-conspirators was torn up in front of the class.<sup>78</sup> Much of her time at school was spent passing notes, fraternizing, and getting kicked out of classes and assembly for talking. She consistently did not turn in her homework or complete assignments in several subjects and was belligerent when punished.<sup>79</sup> On October 13, 1922, Sister Eugenious caught Hildegarde putting a note in her friend Buddy's desk.<sup>80</sup> Hildegarde seemed truly appalled that once confiscated, "she had nerve enough to read the note."<sup>81</sup> Her time spent in the principal's office that afternoon did not seem to affect the rest of her day because she later met her mother at Schuster's Department Store on 12<sup>th</sup> and Vliet Street and bought herself a new pair of oxfords.<sup>82</sup> When her French teacher assigned a writing assignment as punishment for not translating properly, her attitude was clear: "I just made up my mind I wouldn't do that."<sup>83</sup>

A good example of Hildegarde's relationship with school and her instructors happened in the spring semester of 1923 during which Hildegarde engaged in a battle

royal with her English teacher, Mr. John Paul Jones. On her birthday, Thursday, February 1, 1923, Mr. Jones kicked Hildegarde out of English class, so she decided she was going to go to a different English class without asking permission—which she did the next day. The following Monday the infamous Sister Eugenious, who always seemed present when Hildegarde was in trouble, “chased” her down to the office and “balled her out” because Hildegarde did not get her permission to change classes. So she found herself back in her old English class. Apparently her belligerent feelings only increased as the semester progressed and in April she again was staying after school due to talking during English class. Jones instructed her to write 150 times: “I must not talk,” to which Hildegarde commented in her diary: “He should just try to get it,” meaning she had no intention of following his instructions.<sup>84</sup> The next day she was removed from a class to complete the punishment. Later the following week, the quarrel escalated and this time Mr. Jones gave her detention to which she responded again in her diary: “He should try and get it.”<sup>85</sup> Hildegarde continued talking in English, disregarding Mr. Jones throughout the rest of the semester, and continuing to be punished in the same manner.<sup>86</sup> During this same month, Hildegarde was kicked out of assembly and one other class.<sup>87</sup>

This type of behavior in school was a pattern; yet her punishment was never more than that already mentioned. Interestingly, while engaging in inappropriate behavior in school, she was also playing piano at St. John’s dance classes, for some assemblies, and at special celebrations including Armistice Day.<sup>88</sup> Although she was disruptive in class, she was a vital part of the musical community involved with her school. There were some nuns at St. John’s, such as Sister Rosa and Sister Marcella, who tried to gently mentor Hildegarde and expressed their interest and belief in her while encouraging her to



act better in school and pay attention to her studies.<sup>89</sup> In particular, Sister Rosa was one of her confidants in high school. Their relationship was amicable; Hildegarde who was receptive to this guidance. This may be undoubtedly due to the fact that Rosa instructed Hildegarde in piano and music theory.

Studying and playing music was the only subject to which Hildegarde was dedicated. She practiced almost religiously and was very proud of her musical accomplishments including learning to play the organ. There is a great difference in playing an organ, a reed instrument, and the piano, a percussion instrument. While both use a keyboard, the organ functions differently than a piano, requiring a different playing technique, most notably pedals to be played with the feet. Hildegarde took organ lessons from Les Hoadley, the organist at the Milwaukee Theater, who was considered one of the top organists at movie theaters.<sup>90</sup> Hoadley required that Hildegarde audition before he accepted her as his student and charged five dollars per hour or three dollars per half hour for lessons on the theater's Wurlitzer Theater Organ.<sup>91</sup> Her ability to use the pedals the first time playing on the 2 manual 9 rank organ—meaning it had two rows of keyboards and nine ranks of pipes—is another testament to her musical ability.<sup>92</sup> She secured permission from Father J.N. Schiltz to use the pipe organ at St. Sebastian's, her home church, for practice.<sup>93</sup> This is interesting because her lessons would be on an instrument constructed to play popular music with sounds effects for the movies and her practice was on the more formal pipe organ at church. Hildegarde was very pleased with her ability to sight read the pipe organ music and with her natural ability to use the foot pedals while playing.<sup>94</sup> When she practiced the organ, she commented that hours felt like only minutes.<sup>95</sup> While in high school she took formal organ lessons weekly for a few months

and continued to practice on the organ at church.<sup>96</sup> Eventually, she chose to focus more on her piano studies and began taking formal piano lessons from Professor Charles W. Dodge at Marquette University in September of 1923.<sup>97</sup>

Hildegarde's dedication to her piano practice and performance during her teens foreshadowed the diligence with which she undertook her profession throughout her long career. She continually practiced the piano alone as well as with friends, other musicians, and her parents. This was in addition to the music lessons at St. John's and Marquette University. Her classical training pointed her towards a career as a concert pianist. She loved to enrich her study and attend classical performances and high culture events such as Professor Dodge's concert for his seventy-fifth birthday in which he, along with other musicians from Marquette, performed such selections as Beethoven's "Sonata Opus 27, Number 1" and Bach's "Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue."<sup>98</sup> Hildegarde also eagerly attended the Chicago Symphony's performance at the Pabst Theater and commented in her diary that she could not "describe how wonderful it was."<sup>99</sup> In spite of her love for cultured music and performance, Hildegarde's success, even in her teens, came as a result of her participation within popular culture venues rather than through her eager participation in "high-brow" events.

Throughout much of her last two years in high school, Hildegarde worked almost nightly playing piano in movie theaters. This foreshadowed the schedule she kept as professional musician in vaudeville and beyond. The lack of interest she had in school was matched by her commitment to working and earning a wage as a musician. In this time period, Hildegarde earned a respectable amount of money performing in movie houses in Milwaukee. Her pay ranged from \$12 to \$20 a week (the modern equivalent of

roughly \$151 to \$253).<sup>100</sup> During the same time period when she was continually in trouble with Mr. Jones at school, she was playing nightly in movie theaters. She played at numerous theaters in Milwaukee during the years of 1922 through 1924. When she first started working for movie theaters, it was at the Lyric Theater located near her home. She played there from July through September in 1922. The Violet Theater on Vliet St. was where she spent October through December of 1922. The Lyric and Violet seated 575 and 546 customer respectively. Again, at first, Hildegard worked only on the weekends which included two shows on Sundays. As she gained more experience, she began to perform more regularly and by the end of August 1922, she played frequently during the week.<sup>101</sup>

By January 7, 1923 when she started at the Apollo Theater at 2754 North Teutonia Avenue, she was a seasoned enough performer that she worked nearly every night of the week until mid-June of the same year. With seats for 1,140, this theater was much larger than the previous facilities. Hildegard played with several musicians and watched the vaudeville shows that performed after the films. Because musicians provided the only sound for the movies, their performances lasted for the duration of the films shown which meant that the musicians were at the theaters for several hours with only a short intermission. The rigorous schedule kept her out late into the night and caused her to arrive home usually past 10:00 pm on most nights, even during the school year. Perhaps this exacting schedule contributed to her disposition at school. What is certain, this schedule became a way of life for Hildegard.<sup>102</sup>

For a short while, Hildegard stopped playing for movie houses. During June, July, and August of 1923, Hildegard worked as a sales girl for Gimbel Brother's

Department Store located in the heart of downtown Milwaukee on Grand Avenue and the Milwaukee River. Her work as well her frequent shopping in a department store indicates her class status as middle to upper class.<sup>103</sup> Department stores sought to attract middle and upper class women and by the time Hildegard worked for Gimbels, they hired clerks who matched their customer's status.<sup>104</sup> Similar to her schedule at the Apollo Theater, during the time she was employed by Gimbels she worked nearly every day. It was clear that she was not enthralled with her position. Soon into her tenure, she could be found in the storeroom dancing with her co-workers. Her enthusiasm for the department store work was similar to her enthusiasm for school. She attended when she needed but never sought to be the top performer and saw it mostly as an opportunity to socialize. Only three weeks into her job with Gimbels, she began once again to look for work in movie theaters. One aspect of employment at Gimbels was the proximity it gave her to Milwaukee's first radio station which was operated by the department store.<sup>105</sup>

Department stores were trendsetters in radio as they were with other technological innovations such as elevators (which enticed customers to visit their stores).<sup>106</sup> This was no different with radio. In the early days of radio, department stores established their own radio broadcasts. With few other choices for listeners, these broadcasts were sought after by radio owners.<sup>107</sup> In 1921, Gimbels started the first radio station in Milwaukee.<sup>108</sup> Hildegard was often asked to perform in the store by her colleagues who knew she was a musician. Because of this, one of the programmers wanted her to go on the air. Hildegard was not very enthusiastic about this prospect and mentioned it only casually in her diaries, presumably because full impact of being on the radio had little meaning for her. This is supported by the fact that it was not until January 1, 1924, that Hildegard

actually heard a radio, an important enough event that she wrote of it in her diary. She made a note again on May 13, 1924 when she listened to music on the radio for the first time.<sup>109</sup> The radio held much more meaning for her after these events, affecting her when she attended Marquette. While working at Gimbels, however, she was more interested in returning to the movie theaters than playing classical piano on Gimbels radio broadcasts.

Hildegarde started performing again in movies theaters in August 1923. From August through the end of her senior year in May 1924, Hildegarde worked for at least four more theaters. She played at the Pearl Theater at 1700 South 19<sup>th</sup> Street from August through October of 1923, the Grace Theater at 3303 West National Avenue from the end of October through November, and finally the Greenfield Theater at 2212 West Greenfield Avenue for a short while in November. Details about her last semester in high school are vague because less evidence, specifically from her diaries, remains about this time period. It was clear that she had a short respite from playing for movies in the spring of 1924 but was back working a nightly schedule from April through May of that year. Although it is unclear in which theater she was performing, it was within walking distance from her home which suggests she had returned to the Lyric Theater on Vliet St.

Hildegarde stressed in her autobiography that her wages were to supplement the Sell family's household income and that they paid for tuition and music lessons. In reality, Hildegarde had a bank account in which she deposited her wages. She saved some of her money but used a large portion of it as she pleased. One activity in which the very poor did not partake was eating out at restaurants. Hildegarde, her friends, and her family frequently dined out at restaurants. For instance, in the time period from August to December of 1923 alone, she ate several times at the Plankinton Arcade (a

state of the art downtown shopping center), Zoll's Restaurant next to the Crystal Theater, Dad's Restaurant, and Child's Restaurant. Hildegard loved the Chinese food at Charlie Toy's, not to mention her numerous visits to local drug stores for ice cream and cherry phosphates. In addition to dining out, Hildegard had a penchant for shopping and often left school during lunch to visit downtown department stores such as the Boston Store and Gimbels. The things she bought ranged from art supplies and sheet music to hats and kid gloves to match several outfits.<sup>110</sup> In the same time period of August through September of 1923, she purchased such clothing items as a \$35 coat (\$439 in modern terms), an angora sweater for \$4.98 (roughly \$62 today), and a \$9 hat. She also invested in numerous pairs of silk and wool stockings in several colors, purses, jewelry, hair accessories, makeup, vests, and a "stunning blue sweater."<sup>111</sup> During this same period she attended movies at several theaters across Milwaukee such as the Majestic, Merrill, Rialto, and Alahambra.<sup>112</sup> Her money was not spent only on her whims. She was generous with her family and treated her mother and sisters to numerous things such as silk black gloves for her mother, silver bracelets for Honey, and a \$3.85 ticket (approximately 48.30 today) for her mother to see an opera at the Davidson Theater.<sup>113</sup> These few months at the end of 1923 exemplify Hildegard's avid consumerism and also highlight the fact that part of her motivation to stay employed was due to her desire to be part of a consumer society rather than in need or poverty.

Hildegard secured continuous employment in movie theaters throughout 1922 and 1923 because she became associated with two musicians in particular, Art and Al, who procured jobs that included her as the pianist. Hildegard began playing with Art and Al early in her movie theater career and her relationship with them and their

relationship with each other was tumultuous at best. They all fought regularly. Their association is punctuated with scenes of Art and Al threatening to get another pianist, or of them performing without ever speaking, or of the habit of either man quitting in the middle of a performance.<sup>114</sup> Their arguments never really interfered with their jobs and never prevented Hildegarde from getting called by either Art or Al for a new gig.<sup>115</sup> Both men threatened to quit on numerous occasions, but they always returned to playing, and usually in good spirits with “everything like pie” according to Hildegarde.<sup>116</sup> At one point in November 1923, Art secured a raise to \$18 a week for the three of them and then demanded that Al and Hildegarde pay him fifty cents each week for getting the extra money for them.<sup>117</sup> This caused even more antagonism between Hildegarde and Art who teased her often. At one point in November of 1923, Hildegarde reacted to Art’s teasing by hitting him in the nose.<sup>118</sup> After ignoring her for a few days after the incident, Art told her she had gone too far and that he would no longer get jobs for her.<sup>119</sup> Yet by the next evening, Art was again fine with Hildegarde and was very nice to her.<sup>120</sup>

This scenario repeated continually. Slowly over time, Hildegarde gained the upper hand until it came to the point in April 1924 when Art threatened to fire her, she threatened to go to the theater manager.<sup>121</sup> Throughout late April and early May, Art’s antagonism towards Hildegarde intensified and he began exhibiting erratic behavior. This contentiousness continued to build and eventually led to Art ignoring her one night, having a jealous fit over her talking to a boy, and proposing marriage to her on several occasions. His jealousy and anger led to unpredictable actions such as when he intentionally failed to play the music correctly while performing. Eventually, his behavior caused her parents to worry about her going to the shows alone.<sup>122</sup> This is not to

say that Hildegard was innocent in these conflicts. At one point, in jest, she accepted Art's marriage proposal at work. Then the next day when she explained to him she was not serious, Art became very angry.<sup>123</sup> What happened past this incident is not known because of a lack of evidence, but it did not deter Hildegard from continuing to perform for the movie theaters. It is clear, however, Hildegard understood her ability to use her sexuality as a method of manipulating Art. Later while at Marquette University, Hildegard occasionally saw Art while he was performing at various theaters. Neither of them spoke and she lamented that he continued to play the same music he played when they performed together. Unfortunately, he treated his new pianist the same way he treated her.<sup>124</sup>

Art was not Hildegard's only love interest while she was in high school. Because of Hildegard's work schedule and the freedom it provided, she had numerous boyfriends, often at the same time, without her parents knowing. At the time Hildegard toyed with Art, she was also seeing two other boyfriends as well. This included a young man who, like Art, proposed marriage to her. She used her freedom and her parent's busy schedules to explore her sexuality without informing her parents of her activities or seeking their permission. She also used the newfound freedom and privacy afforded through the automobile. As a teenager, Hildegard embraced the modern attitudes of women towards sexuality and engaged in relationships without emotional ties; she sought to have fun rather than seek out serious relationships. This casualness about dating and love interests is exhibited repeatedly. For instance, when one boyfriend broke up with her in August 1922, it was clear from her diary that she did not care.<sup>125</sup>



Hildegarde does not write about having sexual intercourse, but it is clear from her diaries she had numerous encounters which involved kissing and/or heavy petting. Her method for noting this in her diaries was by writing “x” or “x’s.” For instance, when a man she knew picked her up in his car from a show one night, they drove around and “stopped on the country loop and talked x’s.”<sup>126</sup> Another instance on a summer evening begins with Carl picking her up in another friend’s car. Several of her associates met at Carl’s home where they danced and ate. Hildegarde wrote “Elmer was nice – x Carl too x.”<sup>127</sup> Then Carl drove her home and “took me to door – x.” One Sunday, just after Hildegarde started her junior year, someone in her neighborhood asked her to come to his house and play for his guests, which she did. While there she met a man named Emmet with whom she “danced the latest steps.”<sup>128</sup> Then they went out in his Hudson car and he took her “out riding.” They also “stopped and admired the scenery in the Highlands – xx” (which was the neighborhood that bordered Washington Heights on the west).<sup>129</sup>

Hildegarde’s beaux ranged from school chums and other musicians to optometrists and druggists from local pharmacies. While waiting for her streetcar one evening in February 1923, she met a young man who was a druggist in a drugstore near the streetcar stop. She made a point for several nights of flirting with him and discussing chemistry. She was struck with the fact that he looked like Rudolph Valentino.<sup>130</sup> Eventually, they introduced themselves: “His name is Maurice Winestein [sic], and I told him my name was Agnes Berry.”<sup>131</sup> Why she lied is a mystery. Perhaps she suspected that he was Jewish, but whatever the reason, Maurice was none the wiser. A week later took her to a “little room, x” and gave her cold cream and another cosmetic item without charging her.<sup>132</sup> Hildegarde kept up this charade for several months while seeing

Maurice occasionally, accepting the small gifts from him (like face powder) and even allowing him to introduce her to his acquaintances as Ms. Berry.<sup>133</sup> Only when Maurice introduced her to a young woman who had common acquaintances with her, did she reconsider lying to him.<sup>134</sup> She decided a week later to see Maurice and “confessed to him that my name wasn’t Agnes Berry- x.”<sup>135</sup>

It is likely that her parents would not have approved of her seeing someone obviously older than herself. Perhaps this was another contributing factor to Hildegard’s lying about her identity. Maurice was not however, the only person with whom Hildegard associated or dated that might have been an issue with her parents. A doctor of optometry and a lawyer with whom she flirted were most certainly out of question as were the customers from Gimbels who asked her out. It was certain that her relationship with one of her co-workers from Gimbels named “Red” was not approved by her parents. Hildegard met him when she first worked at the department store. Eventually, he called her home and spoke with her mother. Ida told Hildegard that Red was unacceptable because he was not Catholic, although how she knew this is not known.<sup>136</sup> Hildegard and her mother fought about her seeing Red. Hildegard subsequently disregarded what her parents suggested even though at the time she was involved with another young man from St. John’s. She continually agitated her parents with her relationship with Red, intentionally provoking her parents by seeing him. At one point, her mother attempted to intervene in the relationship by keeping secret a letter delivered from Red to Hildegard.<sup>137</sup> The relationship lasted for several months, from December 1923 to May 1924 and possibly longer.<sup>138</sup>

The one anomaly in Hildegarde's relationships during high school happened in May 1923. On this occasion, Hildegarde and her dear friend Mary left school to go eat lunch in a nearby park, most likely Juneau Park.<sup>139</sup> After they ate, they walked and "talked of different things x."<sup>140</sup> It is impossible to know exactly what happened or what this specifically indicates, but if placed within the context of all of the similar notations involving boyfriends, when the "x" symbolized some type of romantic interaction, it is reasonable to assume the same in this instance. This indicates Hildegarde truly embraced the new and changing norms for sexual exploration in the 1920s.

Hildegarde balanced her new modern world with the religious obligations from her family and school. Every week, she attended mass, confession, and took communion. She engaged regularly with nuns and priests and sought plenary indulgences when possible (a plenary indulgence lessens time in purgatory). Throughout her high school years, she kept up her religious duties. In December 1923, she joined the Young Ladies Sodality at St. Sebastian's, her home church.<sup>141</sup> The intent of a sodality was to create an organization for women, both single and married, in which they socialized and reinforced Roman Catholic teaching.<sup>142</sup> When Hildegarde joined however, it does not seem to be due to religious obligation or a spiritual endeavor but as a socializing opportunity.<sup>143</sup> Her interest was on the food and games at the reception after the ceremony rather than the meaning of the organization.<sup>144</sup> While attending Marquette University, her spirituality changed and she said many novenas and kept devotions but it did not overshadow her socializing or modern approach to life.<sup>145</sup>

The Marquette Conservatory of Music at Marquette University opened in 1911, two years after Marquette first allowed women to attend the university.<sup>146</sup> The conservatory offered training in orchestral musical instruments as well as voice and other assorted instruments.<sup>147</sup> The Conservatory also had a department of Dramatic Arts.<sup>148</sup> Upon its inception, the goal was to attract one thousand students by 1920 and the conservatory achieved this goal as Milwaukee grew as a center for music.<sup>149</sup> Throughout an academic year, the Conservatory held numerous concerts which highlighted the talents of the faculty as well as the students.<sup>150</sup> Some of these concerts, such as the one for Professor Dodge (mentioned earlier) honored anniversaries of faculty members. Very often these concerts as well as the plays presented by the Dramatic Arts Department were staged at St. John's Cathedral auditorium which was located a short distance from the university.<sup>151</sup> Although the Conservatory of Music was short-lived (1911-1930) it served an important function in the musical community of Milwaukee by training many local musicians.

Hildegarde attended Marquette University for two academic years, from 1924 through the spring of 1926. Her freshman courses were the usual selection for an incoming student and included English, American History, Public Speaking, Recreation as well as Harmony and Piano with Professor Dodge.<sup>152</sup> Hildegarde did not take a full course load during her sophomore year. Her focus for her second year was on music courses. College brought Hildegarde a new respect for learning. She approached college in a very different manner than high school and applied herself to all of her subjects, studying regularly. She paid close attention to her course work and when assigned research papers or English papers, she worked diligently and consistently, borrowing a

typewriter from a friend to complete the tasks. As with many freshmen, she was disappointed when her labors did not return the grades she wished, such as when she got an “80%” on a paper she worked for two and a half hours to complete. Her response: “sure was disappointing.”<sup>153</sup> Some habits die hard though and on January 25, 1925, she spent part of her day making crib-sheets for an English exam the next day.<sup>154</sup> The same week Hildegard used her cheat sheet for an English exam her friend Charlotte, a well known soprano in Milwaukee, had her crib-sheet for a French exam confiscated and failed the exam.<sup>155</sup> This astonished Hildegard because the crib-notes did not address any of the questions on the exam, yet her friend failed anyway. One of the most important happenings of her freshman year was an invitation to join the national music sorority, Delta Omicron, in spite of her occasional low grades. The sorority inducted her on February 7, 1925 at the Astor Hotel.<sup>156</sup>

Fraternalizing with the sorority was not the only activity in which Hildegard engaged in while in college. Marquette was the first Catholic university to allow women to enroll on an equal basis with men and by the 1920s, Marquette encouraged their coed students to participate fully at university as active members of the community.<sup>157</sup> This included promoting women to participate in athletics. This was partially accomplished by requiring all first-year students to take part in gym activities, including coeds.<sup>158</sup> Hildegard, who was always active in swimming, skating, and playing tennis, became an enthusiastic participant in the activities at the gymnasium. Under Francis Baker, the first director of women’s athletics, Hildegard took a water life-saving class held at the Knights of Columbus tank, an indoor swimming pool located at 15<sup>th</sup> St and Grand Avenue.<sup>159</sup> She swam almost daily outside of class. In addition to swimming, she

engaged in what she referred to as “jumping,” which seemed to be some sort of gymnastics on a trampoline. During her freshman year, she also became an eager participant in golf, something that she continued playing throughout her life. She and her friends practiced driving and took lessons at an indoor golf link.<sup>160</sup> Apparently, someone else in the Sell household played golf because she took what she called a “mashie stick” (a modern day five iron) from their home to use at the indoor link.<sup>161</sup> As was her pattern, Hildegard used golf as an opportunity to shop and purchased a new driver from Schuster’s Department Store. In the early twentieth-century, golf balls were made to order. Hildegard ordered three golf balls made for forty-five cents each, the equivalent of paying \$5.52 today and quite an expense for an expendable sporting item.<sup>162</sup>

Sporting accessories were only one aspect of Hildegard’s continued consumer pursuits while at Marquette. She and her family frequented numerous theaters across Milwaukee such as the Palace, the Wisconsin, and the Alhambra.<sup>163</sup> Her penchant for new styles kept her frequently shopping at the numerous department stores in Milwaukee. On occasion her mother “renewed” old outfits to make them more stylish and Hildegard accessorized with items such as patent leather shoes, gun metal pumps (for \$5.85), a green felt hat, and a black satin hat.<sup>164</sup> Other members of the family also purchased non-essential items during the time Hildegard attended Marquette. The family was fond of attending various musical concerts. For instance, in March 1925, Ida attended a performance of Pablo Casals, a well known classical cellist; Hildegard attended a performance of the Chicago Symphony and Hildegard gave her father a ticket to see Paul Whiteman, a popular band leader of the time.<sup>165</sup>

Hildegarde's wardrobe was important to her. During her time at Marquette she began performing at more formal affairs with the university, so she needed proper clothing for the stage. Hildegarde played piano for the Harlequin Dramatic Club and for this endeavor she and her fellow actors were pictured in a local newspaper.<sup>166</sup> Other formal occasions included the Marquette Mother-Daughter Luncheon and the Marquette Faculty Wives Reception, which incidentally her aunt Rose attended.<sup>167</sup> Because of her reputation as a pianist, in October 1925 an organizer for Varsity Night asked her to debut the new fight song "Ring Out Ahoya" (which remains the MU fight song today).<sup>168</sup> The university held a contest for the new fight song and the secretary of the School of Dentistry, Robert Haukohl, won. Cyril Foster, another pianist, accompanied Hildegarde on Varsity Night, with assorted singers.<sup>169</sup> This event was particularly important and for the occasion, Hildegarde purchased a bright pink dress with black velvet trim.<sup>170</sup> The performance was so well received that a few nights later at the Faculty Wives Reception, someone requested Hildegarde perform the new fight song once again.<sup>171</sup>

These types of performances helped solidify Hildegarde's reputation as a pianist and an accompanist in Milwaukee. Her participation in radio broadcasts, however, gave her the most local notoriety and garnered enough attention that her name and picture appeared frequently in local newspapers. In January 1925, Marquette University joined the *Milwaukee Journal* to form the first 500-watt broadcasting station in Milwaukee. Although WHAD originated as Marquette University's radio station, when it combined with the *Milwaukee Journal* it was transformed from local access to nationwide broadcasts.<sup>172</sup> The premier program to test the station's capabilities occurred at 12:00 am January 24, 1925.<sup>173</sup> Hildegarde accompanied one of the vocalists on this program, and

after the initial broadcast, became a regular solo performer. WHAD's first foray into nationwide listening audience had great reviews. People wrote to WHAD from across the United States to comment on the clarity of their reception. In addition, several articles about the pioneering broadcast appeared in the *Milwaukee Journal*, such as "WHAD Voice Spans Nation: Atlantic and Pacific Fans Write About Milwaukee Station" and "Spreads Fame of Milwaukee: Bulging Mail Still Coming in on First Test Program of WHAD."<sup>174</sup> When she appeared on February 18, 1925, she played eight to ten solos and took requests.<sup>175</sup>

Performing on the radio and for university events bolstered Hildegard's ability to earn a living as a musician in Milwaukee. Initially during her time at Marquette, Hildegard continued her employment at the Lyric Theater. She supplemented that income by playing for gym classes at Marquette (presumably to provide background music for the various activities in the gym, such as dancing). This was something which she pursued throughout the two years she spent as a student. By this time she had more autonomy and authority, and no longer worked under the threatening conditions that she faced with Art and Al. This is not to say that she had no need for other musicians. At the Lyric she became associated with a violin player named Moses who essentially functioned as the orchestra leader. Her relationship with Moses was occasionally stormy but it was nothing like her previous experience. In spite of their differences, Moses gave Hildegard guidance about advancing her career.

Religion was the most serious difference between Moses and Hildegard. Hildegard repeatedly pointed out in her diary that Moses was Jewish. Throughout her high school diary, Hildegard always noted when someone was Jewish, but it is difficult



to tell if this stemmed from a true bias (or racism) or was simply the style of language used at the time. She and Moses argued about God and belief in Christ, but Hildegarde found these conversations interesting.<sup>176</sup> Although Hildegarde understood Moses was Jewish, she seemed to have a naiveté about his beliefs and at one point gave him her copy of the New Testament.<sup>177</sup> Moses repeatedly teased Hildegarde. One Thursday night at the show, he made her so angry she used a racial slur and called him a “dirty kike.”<sup>178</sup> Moses became enraged and told her that a week from Saturday was her last day. Yet none of the anger lasted between them, and a week and a half later they were “all pie.”<sup>179</sup> Hildegarde’s family seemingly did not have biased views of Jews. Moses was welcome in their home and on occasion ate dinner with the family.<sup>180</sup> If Hildegarde’s mother or father held anti-Semitic views, they would not have been so welcoming to Moses or his friends, or attend musical events at Temple Emanu-El as did Ida and Hildegarde’s sisters.<sup>181</sup> Hildegarde continued working full time with Moses for six months after the incident.<sup>182</sup>

Part of the reason Hildegarde quit performing at the Lyric was because of her pursuit of professional jobs in more prestigious venues. The Pfister Hotel held an audition for performers for the Red Room in March 1925. Hildegarde and her friend Charlotte gathered some musical pieces together and went to the audition. Once there, the manager came into the waiting room and asked if there was an accompanist present. Hildegarde was the only one. So she played for several of the other performers as well as for Charlotte. The women were told they could perform the next Wednesday.<sup>183</sup> This performance never occurred but it was just as well because several musicians Hildegarde knew had expressed their displeasure with this particular venue. Hildegarde and her

sister's cello instructor Mr. Smrz sometimes performed together in a quartette and he, in particular, felt that the Pfister Hotel was beneath Hildegard's abilities. He encouraged her to look for better employment.<sup>184</sup> Presumably, the cellist felt Hildegard should focus on classical, high-brow performance venues.

The more esteemed venues in Milwaukee required that their musicians be part of the musicians union. Some of the musicians with whom Hildegard associated felt joining the union was a poor move and expressed to her that if she joined the union, she would never find work. Others encouraged her to join. Her decision to join the union is one of the reasons she left the Lyric. On October 6, 1925, Hildegard paid her \$20 dollar union dues and officially swore in to the union as the only woman at the ceremony.<sup>185</sup> This did not deter Moses from asking her to perform with him and the orchestra for a special opening of a bakery, but instructed her to keep her membership in the union a secret.<sup>186</sup> After this though, Hildegard no longer appeared in the same types of venues as she had previously in Milwaukee. Her decision was deliberate, she targeted new performance scenes that provided her better access to money and the opportunity to become famous. As early as April 2, 1925, she tried to make contact with a travelling vaudeville act. At this time, she called a vaudeville team who advertised in the local paper for a female pianist.<sup>187</sup> She did this because she wanted to leave Milwaukee and become more than a local performer.

The main instigator for Hildegard to join the union was the director of the orchestra at the Alhambra Theater at 334 W. Wisconsin Ave.<sup>188</sup> Heinz Roemheld was a Milwaukee native and a child prodigy. In 1925, at 24 years of age, he attained the position as orchestral director at the Alhambra and became the youngest director in the

country.<sup>189</sup> Later in life he became a composer and arranger for Warner Brothers movie studio, but in 1925 he was well known in Milwaukee as the head of a twenty-five piece orchestra which Hildegarde wanted to join.<sup>190</sup> She met Heinz to discuss becoming the pianist for his orchestra. He was very interested and asked her out on a date.<sup>191</sup> Even though someone else got the job Hildegarde wanted, she and Heinz continued to date. She took a great delight in shocking her friend Charlotte, telling her about what she called her “affair with Heinz.”<sup>192</sup> Both Hildegarde and Heinz took advantage of this situation. Even though she did not get the original job, she socialized with Heinz and his friends who gave her access to other musicians, parties, nice restaurants, and his new car, a Jewett Roadster. Soon this relationship fizzled and Hildegarde tried dating the assistant director, but she did not like him and continued circulating in the same circles as Heinz.

Eventually, this paid off and in November 1925, Hildegarde had the chance to perform in a show that was the most important thus far in her career. Heinz directed a special performance at the Alhambra titled “A Radio Revue” with special guest star Ruth Etting, “Radio’s Sweetheart.”<sup>193</sup> Hildegarde’s name appeared in the advertisements for this directly under Heinz’s billing and undoubtedly attracted a lot of attention, enough that the *New Holstein Reporter* reported on the event as well.<sup>194</sup> During this performance, Hildegarde and Etting shared a dressing room which certainly gave the young and upcoming performer quite a thrill. By this time, Heinz was interested in the Charleston dancer from the show, but his relationship with Hildegarde provided her a first brush with real celebrity.<sup>195</sup>

Clearly, Hildegarde attempted to use her sexuality to influence the situation with Heinz. It was similar to her manipulation of Art and Al in high school, but markedly

more effective. Hildegarde was not ignorant and certainly understood upon her first meeting with Heinz to discuss a position in his orchestra what it meant when he asked her out on a date. She obviously had no feelings for him or any of the other men whom she dated while in college, a point made clear in her writings. Her romances in college were not as prolific as high school and she did not continue to date numerous men at one time. One boyfriend, the brother of her friend Charlotte, was very close to Hildegarde. They remained good friends after their relationship ended. Similarly to high school, she was plagued by another volatile relationship with a young man who was evidently stalking her, conveniently showing up every time she left for college or work or needed a ride. He sent unwanted and unsolicited gifts. Her parents became afraid for her and escorted her to and from activities to limit his interaction with Hildegarde. Apparently, her previous behaviors in high school had an effect on her while at Marquette, causing her reputation to come into question. This is most evident when neighbors went to Ida and Charles and told them Hildegarde's boyfriend was married. This turned out to be untrue since married men were a taboo for Hildegarde. She was very insulted about this story, even though she had no qualms about using unmarried men, like Heinz.

Hildegarde's manipulation of Heinz had worked. She used him to gain access to his contacts in the Milwaukee music scene. He was the reason she had the opportunity to perform with Ruth Etting. That performance lasted for one week and paid \$50. It set in motion the actions which led to Hildegarde signing with "Jerry and her Baby Grands," the vaudeville act that took her out of Milwaukee and across the nation. Soon after the Alhambra show, Hildegarde inquired about a job with the orchestra for the Merrill Theater located at 211 W. Wisconsin Avenue. During these last months in Milwaukee,

she performed in a German show at the Pabst Theater, played often at the Medford Hotel, became one of the staff players for the Wisconsin School of Engineering radio station, and participated in a local vaudeville production in Cedarburg, Wisconsin.<sup>196</sup> By March 1926, the Merrill Theater Orchestra had hired Hildegard. This is presumably where she worked when she auditioned for the show, “Jerry and Her Baby Grands.” Her recollection of the event in her autobiography differed greatly than the reality of the situation. She recounted in *Over 50—So What!* that when this vaudeville show was in town, it was impossible for her to go see it, much less audition for it. She claimed attending the show was nearly impossible because she could not afford to attend the Palace Theater and had no expendable income due to saving money to buy material for a new dress.

This version, however, contradicts the reality of life for Hildegard and her family at this time. In fact, she and her family frequented the Palace, and her love for ready-made clothes and accessories was obvious.<sup>197</sup> In truth, Hildegard worked hard to put herself in a position as a well known local musician to be taken seriously by a national troupe. She had already attempted to make vaudeville connections in August 1925. This new opportunity came at just the right time.<sup>198</sup> A few weeks after she auditioned for “Jerry and Her Baby Grands,” she received a telegram asking her to join the show. Hildegard left Milwaukee to seek her fate. Her debut was in Hartford, Connecticut on October 30, 1926 with Unit 5 of the Jerry and her Baby Grands. The show featured four women pianists in Louis XIV period costumes (male’s clothing) playing four white baby grand pianos on stage at the same time.<sup>199</sup> It was this move which started the next phase in Hildegard’s life and career.

## Conclusion

The year before Hildegarde left Milwaukee was a time of transition for Hildegarde and her family. Life for all members of her family changed and Hildegarde at twenty-years old was moving into adulthood. With Honey in high school, Charles and Ida decided it was time to start thinking of selling their home and store in Washington Heights. Hildegarde's sister Germaine wanted to move from the traffic department of the Wisconsin Telephone Company to the switchboard at the gas company, while pursuing her own career singing and acting locally. Hildegarde came to the understanding that college was not her calling nor was staying in Milwaukee while becoming the best accompanist in the area. Hildegarde did not want to work a regular job and was starting to present herself as a career minded woman not interested in marrying until she accomplished something with her life. This viewpoint was shared with all of Milwaukee through a newspaper article proclaiming "A career means more to Hildegarde than marriage...." It quoted her as saying "My piano is uppermost in my mind."<sup>200</sup> Her autobiographical version of this chance to travel with the vaudeville show paints Hildegarde as a poor downtrodden shoddily dressed young woman. This is an interesting version of her opportunity to travel with a vaudeville show. The reality of the event is much more remarkable. Hildegarde had agency; she knew exactly what she wanted and did everything possible to make it happen. She had no intention of settling down with a local boy and having children. Hildegarde wanted to be a star, and in spite of her love for her family, was not going to become an unmarried woman living with her family and playing piano for local groups.

This does not mean that Hildegarde was unhappy in Milwaukee or with her family. The Sell Family lived active lives and enjoyed each other, friends, family, and all that Milwaukee had to offer its residents in the 1920s. Charles, Ida, and their daughters came from rural Wisconsin and once they moved to the urban center of Milwaukee, they all partook of luxuries available. Hard work was important to all members of the family and all worked in their family store as well as worked at outside jobs to ensure they had expendable income for frivolous things as well as to build their bank accounts.

The experiences of the Sells and their friends give interesting insight into middle class life of the 1920s in Milwaukee. It was important for Hildegarde's family to have a comfortable home which became the center for much of the activity for Hildegarde and her sisters. They often had musicians over for rehearsals and had numerous impromptu dinner guests who were always welcome. Ida and Charles frequently served wine to special guests, though the nation was in the midst of Prohibition. This obvious flouting of the law shows that Milwaukeeans, at least those with whom the Sells associated, were less than compliant with Prohibition. While many Milwaukee bars continued to operate under the guise of "soft drink parlors," these were not the only places to drink.<sup>201</sup> If Hildegarde and her experiences prove anything, it was that she and her friends drank everything from beer to wine to highballs. They also were able to partake of alcohol in more respectable restaurants such as the Oneida Bridge Restaurant.<sup>202</sup> This did not dominate their lives; it was simply part of their recreation which included the love of movies and music. All of these things were part of the Sell family experience which took them outside of their rural roots and their German Catholic culture into the wider more diverse world.

Milwaukee in the 1920s was an important time in Hildegarde's life. Her work in Milwaukee gave her a strong foundation as a professional musician. It exposed her to the good and the bad aspects of the profession, including problems with musicians. She developed in Milwaukee a strong work ethic which served her well throughout her career. Most importantly, it gave her a small taste of minor popularity and living in the limelight. It also gave her the desire to have more than Milwaukee offered. Although she always considered it her hometown, she saw her place as somewhere bigger and brighter with a larger share of the spotlight.

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<sup>1</sup> Hildegarde's comments in her scrapbook about her school tuition for St. John's Cathedral High School, Scrapbook 1, Hildegarde (Loretta Sell) Papers, Marquette University, Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Milwaukee, Wisconsin (hereafter cited as HLS Papers, MU).

<sup>2</sup> A music instructor told Hildegarde this after she accompanied a friend for a music lesson. Diaries, February 13, 1925.

<sup>3</sup> "Gala Show at The Orpheum," unnamed newspaper, New Orleans, Louisiana, February 4, 1932, Scrapbook 8, HLS Papers, MU.

<sup>4</sup> "German Invader," unnamed, undated newspaper, Toledo, Ohio; "Hildegarde Bright Star," *Baltimore Post*, March 14, 1932; *Variety*, March 28, 1931; all three from Scrapbook 8, *ibid*.

<sup>5</sup> These two articles are both in Scrapbook 8, *ibid*. "Hildegarde" *Radio*, Sept 1, 1931 and "Miss Hildegarde" *Radio*, undated.

<sup>6</sup> "Garr and Edwards Score in RKO Bill," unnamed newspaper, Dallas, Texas, January 20, 1932, Scrapbook 8, *ibid*.

<sup>7</sup> "Milwaukee Girl Who Exploits a German Accent," unnamed newspaper, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, September 1931, Scrapbook 8, *ibid*.

<sup>8</sup> Hildegarde, *Over 50—So What!*, with Adele Whitely Fletcher (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1963), 15.

<sup>9</sup> Hildegarde discussed their store throughout her diaries during the time when she lived in Milwaukee. For examples of shopping see: Diaries August 2 and 3, 1922 and February 16, 1923; the Sell vacuum cleaner: Diaries, December 24, 1922; streetcar: Diaries, February 20, 1923.

<sup>10</sup> Joe William Trotter, Jr. *Black Milwaukee: The Making of An Industrial Proletariat 1915-1945*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 4-9. For more information about the Progressive Era and the move towards urbanization, see Robert Weibe, *Search for Order 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967) and Lewis L. Gould, *American in the Progressive Era 1890-1914* (New York: Longman, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> Larry Widen and Judi Anderson, *Milwaukee Movie Palaces* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 1986), 57; Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn of the Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 146.

<sup>12</sup> Widen and Anderson, 57-58.

<sup>13</sup> Lewis A. Erenberg, *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930* (Westport Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1981), 69-72.

<sup>14</sup> Derek Vaillant, "'Your Voice Came in Last Night... But I Thought It Sounded a Little Scared': Rural Radio Listening and 'Talking Back' During The Progressive Era in Wisconsin, 1920-1932," in *Radio Reader: Essays in The Cultural History of Radio*, ed. Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge 2002), 69.



<sup>15</sup> Diaries July 1, 1922- August 21, 1922. It is evident when reading the diary that begins on July 1, 1922, it is a continuation from a previous diary. The earlier diaries are missing. All of the extant diaries used here are in the HLS Papers, MU.

<sup>16</sup> Jeffery K. Olick and Joyce Robbins “Social Memory Studies: From ‘Collective Memory’ to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998): 123.

<sup>17</sup> The diaries contain evidence that Hildegard had read them many times throughout her life. An example of this is Hildegard’s use of a personal check from her checking account in her later years as a bookmark in a diary from her early career.

<sup>18</sup> Baptismal Certificate, Folder 1, Box 12, HLS Papers, MU.

<sup>19</sup> An example of the Jermain family’s social status is the fact that her brother Louis Jermain was an M.D. and eventually became Dean of the Marquette University Medical School. For information about Hildegard’s household feeling inferior to Ida’s side of the family see: Hildegard, 6-7.

<sup>20</sup> New Holstein Historical Society, “New Holstein – The Early Years,” excerpted from the Timm House Structure Report, <http://www.newholsteinhistory.info/main.asp?SectionID=6&SubSectionID=35&ArticleID=28&TM=10283.02>.

<sup>21</sup> Population information for New Holstein in 1876 comes from “Calumet County: A Brief Historical Sketch Containing Numerous Interesting Items,” *Chilton Times*, Chilton, Wisconsin, February 12, 1876 <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/wlha/articleView.asp?pg=8&orderby=&id=13349&pn=1&adv=yes&hd=&np=&ln=&fn=&q=&y1=&y2=&ci=&co=Calumet&mhd=&shd=>; Information regarding Charles F. Sell’s family history is available at the website for Calumet County, Wisconsin, Genealogy & History, hosted by Rootsweb, under the section titled “Obituaries” in the obituaries of George C., John, Martha, and Margaretha Sell, <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~calumet/15.htm> (hereafter cited as Calumet County Genealogy Webpage).

<sup>22</sup> Obituary for Margaretha Sell, June 10, 1932, Calumet County Genealogy Webpage.

<sup>23</sup> The information regarding the heritage of Ida Jermain Sell is found in a biographical sketch of her brother Louis Francis Jermain, M.D. in *Memoirs of Milwaukee County Vol II* by Jerome Anthony Watrous, originally published in Madison by the Western Historical Association in 1909. It is now available online through Internet Archives at <http://www.archive.org/details/memoirsofmilwauk02watr> as well the Manitowoc County Personal Sketches, <http://www.2manitowoc.com/biosJ.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Obituary, unnamed newspaper, Scrapbook 9, HLS Papers, MU.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph J., Rappel, *A Centennial History of the Manitowoc County School Districts and Its Public School System, 1848-1948* (Manitowoc, Wisconsin: Manitowoc Engraving, 1948), 153, <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/WI.manCenten>.

<sup>26</sup> Obituary, unnamed newspaper, Scrapbook 9, HLS Papers, MU.

<sup>27</sup> J.M. Cerletty, “Our Heritage: Medical Education in Milwaukee,” *Wisconsin Medical Journal* 103, No. 7 (2004): 31, [http://www.wisconsinmedicalsociety.org/\\_WMS/publications/wmj/issues/wmj\\_v103n7/Cerletty2.pdf](http://www.wisconsinmedicalsociety.org/_WMS/publications/wmj/issues/wmj_v103n7/Cerletty2.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Hildegard, 6-7.

<sup>30</sup> Manitowoc County Marriages, <http://www.2manitowoc.com/marSchw.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Hildegard, 3.

<sup>32</sup> This is evident in photograph XII in *Over 50 So What!*.

<sup>33</sup> Hildegard, 2.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 6-7.

<sup>37</sup> Information about and photographs of early automobiles are available at <http://www.earlyamericanautomobiles.com>.

<sup>38</sup> Diaries, December 25, 1923; January 2, 1924.

<sup>39</sup> Lewis Atherton, *Main Street on the Middle Border* (1954; repr., Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 279.

<sup>40</sup> James Lincoln Collier, *The Rise of Selfishness in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 85.

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- <sup>41</sup> William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 16-17.
- <sup>42</sup> Cynthia Adams Hoover, "Promoting the Piano" in *Piano Roles: Three Hundred Years of Life with the Piano* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 64-65.
- <sup>43</sup> Diaries, July 17, 1922.
- <sup>44</sup> In 1930, Milwaukee restructured its street numbering system and at that time, 5444 Vliet became 5508 West Vliet. Information for the changed addresses in Milwaukee are available in the *Milwaukee City Directory* from 1930 which had a supplement called *Wright's Street Guide Supplement*.
- <sup>45</sup> Washington Heights Neighborhood Website, "History" [www.washingtonheights.com/history.htm](http://www.washingtonheights.com/history.htm).
- <sup>46</sup> Bayard Still, *Milwaukee: The History of a City* (Madison: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1948), 384. Information about the development of Washington Heights Neighborhood is found under "History," [www.washingtonheights.com/history.htm](http://www.washingtonheights.com/history.htm).
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>48</sup> John M. McCarthy, *Making Milwaukee Mightier: Planning and the Politics of Growth 1910-1960* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009), 59.
- <sup>49</sup> John Gurda, *The Making of Milwaukee* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee County Historical Society 1999), 392.
- <sup>50</sup> Hildegard, 56-57.
- <sup>51</sup> Gurda, 203
- <sup>52</sup> Still, 548.
- <sup>53</sup> Hildegard mentions these activities throughout her diaries. For examples, see Diaries for boating, July 17, 1922; tennis, July 20, 1922; swimming, January 7, 1925; golf, April 3, 1925; ice skating, August 3, 1922. More information about Castle Ice Gardens which opened in March 1922 can found at, [http://oldmilwaukee.net/forum\\_old/album\\_showpage.php?pic\\_id=104&sid=c5fb70b3249274568b91d2ae01a837b](http://oldmilwaukee.net/forum_old/album_showpage.php?pic_id=104&sid=c5fb70b3249274568b91d2ae01a837b).
- <sup>54</sup> Gurda, 271.
- <sup>55</sup> Trotter, 40.
- <sup>56</sup> Still, Table 1, 570-571.
- <sup>57</sup> Still, Table 4, 574.
- <sup>58</sup> Eric Paulson, "Washington Heights Shines as Premier Milwaukee Neighborhood," July 11, 2003, OnMilwaukee.com, <http://www.onmilwaukee.com/visitors/articles/washingtonheights.html>.
- <sup>59</sup> Statistics of homes in Milwaukee in 1920 are available in Gurda, 253, and statistics about one third of homes across the United States with electricity is available in Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 203, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.00605>.
- <sup>60</sup> Diaries, December 24, 1922.
- <sup>61</sup> Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology From the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1983), 177 and Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (New York: Henry Holt, 1982), 78.
- <sup>62</sup> Cowan, 174.
- <sup>63</sup> *Sears and Roebuck Catalog*, Fall 1922.
- <sup>64</sup> This calculation comes from the Consumer Price Index Inflation Calculator provided by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl>.
- <sup>65</sup> Receipt for the Fall semester of 1921, Scrapbook 1, HLS Papers, MU.
- <sup>66</sup> Hildegard, 59.
- <sup>67</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>68</sup> Diaries, July 1-2, 1922.
- <sup>69</sup> Diaries, July 1922.
- <sup>70</sup> The idea of "movie palaces" occurred in 1924 with the opening of the Wisconsin Theater. Still, 450.
- <sup>71</sup> Descriptions of the stereotypical image of the flapper and the "New Woman" are found in Joan M. Jensen and Lois Scharf, eds., "Introduction," in *Decades of Discontent: The Women's Movement, 1920-1940* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1983), 5, and Mary P. Ryan, "The Projection of a New Womanhood:

The Movie Moderns in the 1920s,” in *Decades of Discontent: The Women’s Movement, 1920-1940* (Westport, Greenwood Press, 1983), 116.

<sup>72</sup> Photograph taken Wednesday April 18, 1923, Scrapbook 1, HLS Papers, MU.

<sup>73</sup> Joshua Zeitz, *Flapper: A Madcap Story of Sex Style Celebrity and the Women Who Made America Modern* (New York: Corwn Publishers, 2006), 9; also reinforced throughout Mary P. Ryan’s chapter, “The Projection of A New Womanhood.”

<sup>74</sup> Diaries, March 1, 1923.

<sup>75</sup> Bobbed her hair, Diaries July 6, 1923; rouge April 28, 1923.

<sup>76</sup> Diaries, October 27, 1922.

<sup>77</sup> Scrapbook 1, HLS Papers MU.

<sup>78</sup> Diaries, December 14, 1923; January 8, 1924.

<sup>79</sup> Examples in Diaries October 17, 1922; November 17, 1922; September 24, 1923.

<sup>80</sup> Scrapbook 1, HLS Papers, MU.

<sup>81</sup> Diaries, October 13, 1922.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Diaries, November 16, 1922.

<sup>84</sup> Diaries, April 16, 1923.

<sup>85</sup> Diaries, April 25, 1923.

<sup>86</sup> Diaries, May 15, 1923; Diaries May 29, 1923.

<sup>87</sup> Diaries, April 1923; May 29, 1923.

<sup>88</sup> Diaries, November 4, 1922; November 11, 1922; November 12, 1922.

<sup>89</sup> An example of this is seen in Diaries, May 16, 1923.

<sup>90</sup> Newspaper article July 1923, Scrapbook 1, HLS Papers, MU.

<sup>91</sup> Diaries, June 2, 1923.

<sup>92</sup> Information about the type of organ at the Milwaukee Theater is found in Widen and Anderson, 144; For more information about theater organs, The American Theater Organ Society website has numerous examples of recorded theater organ music with several recordings of sound effects developed for movie accompaniment. <http://www.atos.org>.

<sup>93</sup> Diaries, June 3, 1923; Reverend J. N. Schiltz’s name was confirmed through St. Sebastian Catholic Church, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

<sup>94</sup> Diaries, June 5, 1923.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Diaries, August 12, 1923.

<sup>97</sup> Diaries, September 22, 1923; *The Hilltop*, 1924, pp. 146, 198. (*The Hilltop* was Marquette University’s yearbook. All yearbooks cited here were accessed through the Digital Collections of Marquette University at <http://digitalmarquette.cdmhost.com/HT/index.html>.)

<sup>98</sup> Diaries, October 29, 1923; *The Hilltop* 1924, p. 198.

<sup>99</sup> Diaries, January 7, 1924.

<sup>100</sup> These numbers were calculated using the Inflation Calculator and the year 1923 as the reference year. The exact calculation was \$151.70 to \$252.89.

<sup>101</sup> All details about the locations of Milwaukee movie theaters and their seating capacity is taken from the listing of theaters provided by Larry Widen and Judi Anderson in *Milwaukee Movie Palaces*.

<sup>102</sup> Hildegard noted in her diaries when she played at the movie theaters and her schedule in the spring of 1923 is evident from her notations at the time.

<sup>103</sup> Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 76-77.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 185.

<sup>105</sup> Still, 450.

<sup>106</sup> Noah Arceneaux, “The Wireless in the Window: Department Stores and Radio Retailing in the 1920s,” *Journal of Mass Communication Quarterly* 83, no. 3 (Autumn 2006): 582; Eric Barnouw, *From A Tower of Babel: A History of Broadcasting in the United States, Volume I- 1933* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 99.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 581-595; Also see Jan Whitaker, *Service and Style: How the American Department Store Fashioned the Middle Class* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2006), 135.

<sup>108</sup> Still, 450.

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- <sup>109</sup> Diaries, January 1, 1924; May 13, 1924.
- <sup>110</sup> Diaries, for kid gloves, October 1, 1923; November 24, 1923
- <sup>111</sup> Diaries, for coat, November 1, 1923; angora sweater, October 8, 1923; stockings, October 13, 1923 and November 10, 1923.
- <sup>112</sup> Diaries, for Majestic, September 6, 1923; Merrill, September 18, 1923; Rialto, September 26, 1923; Alahambra, November 10, 1923.
- <sup>113</sup> Diaries, October 27, 1923; December 1, 1923; November 5, 1923.
- <sup>114</sup> Examples of this can be found almost daily throughout the September and October 1923 diaries. Specific dates for reference are September 4, 5, 6, 12, 1923; October 10, 14, 1923; and November 4, 9, 1923.
- <sup>115</sup> An example of this is seen in Diaries October 30, 1923 and December 23, 1923.
- <sup>116</sup> Diaries, for example of threats to quit, June 3, 1923 and November 4, 1923; “pie” comments, September 18, 1923.
- <sup>117</sup> Diaries, September 30, 1923.
- <sup>118</sup> Diaries, November 5, 1923.
- <sup>119</sup> Diaries, November 9, 1923.
- <sup>120</sup> Diaries, November 10, 1923.
- <sup>121</sup> Diaries, April 26, 1924.
- <sup>122</sup> Diaries, April 25, 1924.
- <sup>123</sup> Diaries, May 13, 1924.
- <sup>124</sup> Diaries, October 4, 1925.
- <sup>125</sup> Diaries, August 7, 1922.
- <sup>126</sup> Diaries, October 3, 1923.
- <sup>127</sup> Diaries, July 10, 1923
- <sup>128</sup> Diaries, October 1, 1922
- <sup>129</sup> Diaries, October 1, 1922.
- <sup>130</sup> Diaries, February 20, 26, 1923.
- <sup>131</sup> Diaries, February 28, 1923. The spelling of his last name is most likely Weinstein instead of Winestein.
- <sup>132</sup> Diaries, March 7, 1923.
- <sup>133</sup> Diaries, March 14, 1923; May 7, 21, 28, 1923.
- <sup>134</sup> Diaries, May 30, 1923.
- <sup>135</sup> Diaries, June 6, 1923.
- <sup>136</sup> Diaries, December 13, 1923.
- <sup>137</sup> Diaries, January 15, 1924.
- <sup>138</sup> The relationship is evident throughout diaries of December 1923 and January, April, and May 1924. There are no known diaries for February, March, or the first part of April, 1924.
- <sup>139</sup> Diaries, May 28, 1923. It is difficult to read the name of the park in the diary entry, but it begins with “Jun” and is presumably Juneau which is near St. John’s Cathedral High School.
- <sup>140</sup> Diaries, May 28, 1924.
- <sup>141</sup> Diaries, December 2, 1923; Scrapbook 1, December 2, 1923 HLS Papers, MU.
- <sup>142</sup> Christine N. Jaworski, “Women and the Church: Catholicism, Social Progress, and Reconciliation” Seminar Paper for History 320, April 17, 2004, Marquette University, Milwaukee Wisconsin.
- <sup>143</sup> Scrapbook 1, December 2, 1923, HLS Papers, MU.
- <sup>144</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>145</sup> Diaries, September 25, 1924.
- <sup>146</sup> *The Hilltop* 1915, p. 109.
- <sup>147</sup> Thomas J. Jablonsky, *Milwaukee’s Jesuit University: Marquette 1881-1981* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2007), 78.
- <sup>148</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>149</sup> *The Hilltop*, 1920, p. 165.
- <sup>150</sup> Jablonsky, 78.

- <sup>151</sup> The use of St. John's Cathedral auditorium for concerts and plays is evident throughout *The Hilltop* during the years the Conservatory was open. Also shown in "M.U. Mystery Play at St. John's Nov. 12," unnamed newspaper 1924, Scrapbook 3, HLS Papers, MU.
- <sup>152</sup> Trial Study List, Scrapbook 3, *ibid.*
- <sup>153</sup> Diaries, March 10, 1925.
- <sup>154</sup> Diaries, January 25, 1925.
- <sup>155</sup> Diaries, January 31, 1925.
- <sup>156</sup> Diaries, February 7, 1925.
- <sup>157</sup> Jablonsky, 136.
- <sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*; "Coeds Learn Life Saving at K.C.," unnamed newspaper, Scrapbook 3, HLS Papers MU; "They'll Save You—The Pleasure is Yours," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, undated, Scrapbook 3, HLS Papers, MU.
- <sup>160</sup> Diaries, March 5, 1925.
- <sup>161</sup> Diaries, April 3, 1925.
- <sup>162</sup> Diaries, April 3, 1925.
- <sup>163</sup> Diaries, January 5, 18, 1925; March 16, 1925.
- <sup>164</sup> Diaries, March 7, 1925; September 30, 1925; March 25, 1925; October 3, 1925
- <sup>165</sup> Diaries, March 23, 29, 30, 1925.
- <sup>166</sup> "Student-Actors," *Wisconsin News* November 13, 1924, Scrapbook 3, HLS Papers, MU.
- <sup>167</sup> Scrapbook 3, *ibid.*; Diaries, November 10, 1925.
- <sup>168</sup> Diaries, October 30, 1925. *The Hilltop* 1926, p. 111.
- <sup>169</sup> *The Hilltop* 1926, p. 111.
- <sup>170</sup> Diaries, November 4, 1925.
- <sup>171</sup> Diaries, November 10, 1925.
- <sup>172</sup> Jablonsky, 145.
- <sup>173</sup> "Coast to Coast Reception for Station WHAD" unnamed newspaper, Scrapbook 3, HLS Papers, MU.
- <sup>174</sup> Articles are in Scrapbook 3, *ibid.*
- <sup>175</sup> Diaries, February 18, 1925.
- <sup>176</sup> Diaries, November 11, 1925.
- <sup>177</sup> Diaries, August 23, 1925.
- <sup>178</sup> Diaries, April 2, 1925.
- <sup>179</sup> Diaries, April 13, 1925.
- <sup>180</sup> Diaries, January 6, 1925.
- <sup>181</sup> Diaries, September 18, 1925.
- <sup>182</sup> Diaries, October 3, 1925.
- <sup>183</sup> Diaries, March 7, 1925.
- <sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>185</sup> Diaries, October 6, 1925.
- <sup>186</sup> Diaries, October 22, 31, 1925.
- <sup>187</sup> Diaries, April, 2, 1925.
- <sup>188</sup> Widen and Anderson, 122.
- <sup>189</sup> "Given Post at Alahambra," unnamed, undated newspaper, Scrapbook 3, HLS Papers MU.
- <sup>190</sup> Patrick McGilligan, ed. "Introduction," *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), 61n 57.  
[http://books.google.com/books?id=UVfIKEqIkDMC&printsec=frontcover&dq=mcgilligan+yankee+doodle+dandy&source=bl&ots=Q49-hHVAfS&sig=7GIFtPa7oyQ6AOu3IDnme1GPZcQ&hl=en&ei=vCNiS9mYIoTUM9eJ8YwO&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CDUQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=UVfIKEqIkDMC&printsec=frontcover&dq=mcgilligan+yankee+doodle+dandy&source=bl&ots=Q49-hHVAfS&sig=7GIFtPa7oyQ6AOu3IDnme1GPZcQ&hl=en&ei=vCNiS9mYIoTUM9eJ8YwO&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CDUQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=&f=false)
- <sup>191</sup> Diaries, August 14, 15, 1925.
- <sup>192</sup> Diaries, August 26, 1925.
- <sup>193</sup> Newspaper advertisement, Scrapbook 3, HLS Papers, MU; Diaries, October 13, 1925; November 7, 1925.
- <sup>194</sup> *New Holstein Reporter*, November 6, 1925, Scrapbook 3, HLS Papers, MU.
- <sup>195</sup> Diaries, November 8, 1925.

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<sup>196</sup> Diaries, November 15, 1925; Advertisement for Pabst Theater, “Die Roje von Stambul,” Scrapbook 3, HLS Papers, MU; “New Staff Artists” unnamed undated newspaper, Scrapbook 3, HLS Papers, MU; Diaries, November 1, 1925; Advertisement for Cedarburg, Wisconsin event, Scrapbook 4, HLS Papers, MU.

<sup>197</sup> Examples of attendance at the Palace Theater are evident Diaries, January 18, 1925; February 16, 1925 and September 3, 1925.

<sup>198</sup> Diaries, August 2, 1925.

<sup>199</sup> Scrapbook 4, HLS Papers, MU.

<sup>200</sup> Unnamed, undated newspaper, Scrapbook 4, *ibid.*

<sup>201</sup> Information regarding saloons called “soft drink parlors” came from Monica S. Gallamore, “Moonshine, Policewomen, and Shimmy Queens: How the Federated Church Women of Milwaukee County ‘Saved’ the City,” Seminar paper, spring 2007, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

<sup>202</sup> Diaries, August 29, 1925.

## Chapter Two

### From a Duck to a Swan: Hildegarde's Transformation from Ensemble to Main Attraction

A Milwaukee girl with a catchy voice, an expressive face, a fine figure and plenty of glamour is a No. 1 bet for television.<sup>1</sup>

On Friday April 14, 1939, a photographer took Hildegarde's picture at the Savoy Newsstand buying a copy of *Life* magazine with her picture on the cover. "An unforgettable day," she wrote in her diary, "15 million people are seeing "Life" magazine—and my picture on the cover—really one of the greatest thrills in my life so far."<sup>2</sup> As usual, Hildegarde felt more notoriety and excitement awaited her and her career. The April 17, 1939 *Life* magazine with Hildegarde's photograph and name on the front was a coup for her and Anna Sosenko who by this time was in complete control of Hildegarde's public and private life. Inside the magazine, the article was titled, "HILDEGARDE" with a subtext, "A Milwaukee girl with a catchy voice, an expressive face, a fine figure and plenty of glamour is a No. 1 bet for television." The accompanying story publicized her current radio program "99 Men and Girl" and proclaimed that the "Television Girl" is good for radio because of her voice but better for television because of her appearance. The writer referred to her as the "Television Girl" because back in 1937 she appeared on the first television show broadcast and had been dubbed, the "Television Girl." In addition, the other photographs in the article show Hildegarde wearing her signature full length opera gloves which came into style for women because of her. The photo spread showed several shots of Hildegarde in different poses interspersed with the lyrics of her signature song, "Darling Je Vous Aime

Beaucoup.” The article firmly entrenched in American culture that Hildegarde was very popular in Europe and listed her as twenty-seven years old when in fact she was thirty-three.

Hildegarde’s path to the cover of *Life* took thirteen years from the time she first began travelling professionally. During that time she became part and parcel of the entertainment trends of the era. She learned her profession on the road with different vaudeville shows performing with various artists from Sophie Tucker and Ira Berlin to George Gershwin and Joe Laurie. In 1933, she and Anna left for London where she began honing her skills as a performer in cabarets and night clubs. During their years in Europe, Hildegarde and Anna became friends with a diverse group of people from “White Russians” who fled to Paris during the Russian Revolution to American expatriates like Josephine Baker. Once Hildegarde and Anna returned to the United States in 1936, Hildegarde was truly a sensation and thanks to Anna’s clever use and manipulation of press releases, Hildegarde became a national celebrity.

The years from 1926 through 1939 were transformative years for Hildegarde, both professionally and personally. In 1926 when she left her home in Milwaukee to travel the vaudeville circuit, she was a pianist and accompanist but not a singer or headliner. During only a few years, roughly 1926 until 1931, she moved from being just a piano player to a rarity in the world of entertainment, a woman who played piano and sang. By 1935, “Darling Je Vous Aime Beaucoup” was a hit in Europe and Hildegarde was the darling of the cabaret. Hildegarde worked tirelessly promoting herself in New York to producers, directors, and people in the newly forming industry of “Talkies” or movies with sound. She cleverly allowed all sorts of men to fall madly in love with her and



propose marriage in order to get what she wanted. Over time, her persona on stage moved from playing literally in the shadows to headlining her own shows. Hildegard's makeover happened in part because of the strength of mind and vision of Anna Sosenko whom Hildegard first met in January 1930. Anna wrote "Darling Je Vous Aime Beaucoup" and managed to transform not only Hildegard, but herself from the daughter of a rooming house owner to one of the only female managers in show business in the early and mid-twentieth century. This relationship was the most important for Hildegard personally and professionally, and together she and Anna created what came to be known as "The Incomparable Hildegard." By 1939, when Hildegard was the cover for *Life* she had made her truly national debut, no longer in the shadows or the orchestra pit; she was now in the living rooms of Americans from coast to coast.

During these same years, the nation as a whole also underwent major changes. The Roaring Twenties came to a screeching halt with the stock market crash in October 1929. This brought the Great Depression which changed the lives of most Americans and much of the world as well. The desperation of Americans affected their voting patterns. After having spent a decade under Republican leadership, they voted for Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932 heralding in a new era for Americans which had long lasting and permanent effects on the United States and its history.

The Depression and innovations in technology caused great transformations in the entertainment industry as well. The first "talkie," *The Jazz Singer* starring Al Jolson, premiered in 1927 and changed movies forever. Not all movies immediately became talkies and for several years there was a mix of sound and silent films in theaters across the United States. Vaudeville also changed dramatically in the years between 1926 and

1939. Vaudevillians often sought to transition from the vaudeville stage to movies and radio. The predominance of vaudevillians in these new industries was apparent in the careers of people like Al Jolson, Milton Berle, Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, and Hildegard. Many of the people with whom Hildegard played in vaudeville made names for themselves in movies and on the radio. Also important was the testing of television in the late 1930s which afforded Hildegard the opportunity to make national headlines.

In this time period, Hildegard's family made great transformations. In addition to adjusting to Hildegard leaving home, the family dealt with illness, the Depression, and personal change. Her family sold their home and grocery store in the Washington Heights neighborhood in Milwaukee for \$11,500 (equivalent to roughly \$144,198 dollars in modern terms) and moved to downtown Milwaukee near Juneau Park where they purchased a home for \$14,000.<sup>3</sup> The family did well enough to write a check to the bank for half of the purchase price. They enjoyed their new lives in the home. During this time, the family took in boarders and Hildegard's father, Charles, opened a popcorn cart as a partial retirement business until he became ill with cancer and could no longer work. Both of Hildegard's sisters, Honey and Germaine, attempted to have their own careers on the vaudeville stage and with some success, but both chose not to continue on that path. Several of Hildegard's close family members such as her Uncle Louis Germaine passed away and in 1933, after a prolonged illness, Hildegard's father died. This too had a profound effect on her life and the lives of her family.

## **Vaudeville**

By the time Hildegard joined the “Jerry and Her Baby Grands” vaudeville production in 1926, vaudeville was in its last throes as a major style of entertainment in the United States.<sup>4</sup> Growing from New York concert saloons in the 1860s, the vaudeville stage eventually embraced a wide range of performers and countless types of acts.<sup>5</sup> Vaudeville shows thrived on variety and their promoters looked to entice as many paying customers as possible. To do this, they mixed classical music with Japanese jugglers and ballroom dancers with comedy. The shows were comprised of travelling troupes who played throughout the country. Later these variety shows had five or six acts separated by a movie. The performers were expected to play from two to five shows a day depending on the venue. Vaudeville was organized around circuits and whichever circuit the act was a part, they travelled from city to city playing in that circuit’s theaters. The two most prominent circuits were the Keith Albee and the Orpheum. But there were other more localized circuits as well, such as the Finkelstein and Ruben circuit, a regional organization that dominated the theaters in North and South Dakota and had theaters in Minnesota and Wisconsin.<sup>6</sup> (Incidentally, Honey, Hildegard’s sister, travelled for a short while in 1927 through the Finkelstein and Ruben circuit.)<sup>7</sup>

For performers on the circuits, there was a distinct vaudeville season. Starting in the fall and continuing throughout the spring, acts travelled during the cooler parts of the year, due to a lack of air-conditioning. Beginning in 1930, theaters added air conditioning or cooling plants to their businesses to create more comfortable summer environments for their customers. This encouraged more acts to perform during the long summer months. Interestingly enough, patrons did not like the cool theaters and felt it was too cold which left theater owners scratching their heads.<sup>8</sup>

Life in vaudeville for the performers was strikingly similar regardless of the circuit in which they travelled or their level of popularity. Hildegard's experience epitomizes much of this.<sup>9</sup> Most performed in the best and worst of conditions. Long train rides across the country in combination with often playing four shows a day left little time for outside activities or outside friends. This meant in some ways they remained isolated, only associating with other performers. Their subculture entertained the masses while living well outside the boundaries of the rest of society. Performances generally began in the late afternoon for matinees and continued well into the night leaving the performers on schedules far different than most Americans and certainly different than the life Hildegard led in Milwaukee. Getting up late in the day and having dinner after the final show meant the middle of the night was the realm in which they existed, often leaving parties and night clubs as the sun came up.<sup>10</sup>

Rehearsing and performing took up time in their day, but this schedule left long intervals with nothing to do. Consequently vaudevillians engaged in a range of activities to combat the inevitable boredom. Hildegard embroidered and knitted so much that she made bedspreads, pillow shams, scarves, and sweaters to give as gifts for family.<sup>11</sup> Several of the men played cards and gambled which led to another pastime which was fighting.<sup>12</sup> This is not to mention the numerous alcohol soaked gatherings before and after Prohibition with musicians, singers, dancers, acrobats and the like. Even within their small circle of performers there existed divisions among the performers which led to disagreements and fighting. Musicians liked other musicians, dancers liked other dancers and so on. At times this led to tensions between the groups with statements like "once a

dancer always a dancer.”<sup>13</sup> Hildegarde and her friends were avid readers and she kept long lists of books she read during the year and shared her books with others.<sup>14</sup>

The performers shared more than books. They shared complaints and problems that were endemic on the road. One of the most common complaints about travelling for vaudevillians was the extreme cold of the trains on which they rode.<sup>15</sup> This made the numerous hours spent in their berths miserable. Not that arriving at their location alleviated the cold. Preparing for performances, while sharing cramped, dirty, damp, and cold dressing rooms with others, lent to the misery of the road.<sup>16</sup> Security was lax at most theaters and this meant that performers often had money stolen from their dressing rooms either by thieves or other performers.<sup>17</sup> Since managers paid in cash, this meant a whole week’s pay could be stolen while someone was working. Sometimes performers had the chance to stay in nicer hotels and often the artists negotiated the terms of their hotel bills. Hildegarde used her charm and good looks to manipulate the hotel managers into getting what she wanted, such as a private bath. No matter where they found lodging, there was always the potential hazard of bed bugs and mice.<sup>18</sup>

Not everything involved with travelling the circuits was bad. For many of the performers it was their first chance to explore the world around them. Hildegarde travelled from coast to coast visiting major cities such as Los Angeles, Seattle, St. Louis, Denver, and New York City. It was exciting for Hildegarde to travel and take photos of her sightseeing. She kept detailed records of these opportunities such as travelling through the Rocky Mountains and visiting Graumann’s Chinese Theater only months after it opened in Los Angeles.<sup>19</sup> Travel was not limited to the United States and Hildegarde saw many cities in Canada as well as England and Scotland. These

adventures included meeting performers from around the world and consequently Hildegarde became friends with people from places like China and Japan. She even dated a Persian performer.<sup>20</sup> Another major perk was the salary which ranged for Hildegarde from \$260 earnings in January 1927 to roughly \$500 in January 1932; this was a range of roughly \$3,260 to \$7,952 in modern terms and was good pay for the Depression era.<sup>21</sup> This level of pay helped Hildegarde continue pursuing one of her favorite pastimes, which was shopping: “Gee how I love to spend money—I just can’t resist it especially when I have some in my pocket.” With this feeling it was good Hildegarde had the ability to remain employed and earn good pay checks throughout this period in her life.<sup>22</sup>

Vaudevillians spent much of their time in restaurants and after dinner moved to nightclubs which meant they consumed rich food and copious amounts of alcohol whether in respected establishment or speak-easies. Meeting in restaurants was as much a part of vaudeville life as living in hotels and travelling on notoriously cold and uncomfortable trains. It made sense that vaudevillians met and conspired in restaurants, with no permanent home or apartment. They never cooked for themselves and frequented restaurants out of necessity. Because of the hours they kept, there was little time for physical activities or exercise and coupled with the restaurant and drinking culture, this led to Hildegarde having the shocking realization her weight was much higher than she expected. Hildegarde began doing reducing exercises in April 1928. After a few weeks, she was shocked that she still weighed 146 pounds, much higher than she wanted. Throughout May and June, she became focused on losing weight. It was during this time, that Hildegarde developed an obsession with her weight. This would

plague her throughout her life. She began weighing herself, obsessing on what she ate in spite of the fact that much of the socializing in her world occurred in restaurants.

Acts were not permanent arrangements. They changed continuously adding a musician and dropping another, or wooing musicians away from each other. Acts came and went and this lent an air of impermanence to the whole affair of vaudeville. For Hildegarde, this is the way in which she became associated with “Jerry and Her Baby Grands.” The act played Milwaukee in 1926 and Hildegarde auditioned for Jerry. A few weeks later, they needed a new pianist and contacted Hildegarde. The theme-based act had four white grand pianos on stage with four young women dressed in period clothing from the era of Louis XIV. The catch was all of the costumed young women at the pianos dressed as men from the era, with powdered wigs, satin breeches, and vests. Playing with this act gave Hildegarde an excellent education about the business of show business. Certainly she understood the rigors of rehearsing because she was nothing if not dedicated to being a musician. She was not accustomed, however, to practicing in music stores because the theater was busy and the stores provided the only places to get the whole act together. From the time she joined “Jerry and Her Baby Grands” until she got her break with a Gus Edwards show, she travelled with several acts, some of whom were famous or became famous later.

Hildegarde left “Jerry and Her Baby Grands” and began touring in April of 1927 with an act in which she was the accompanist for John Vale, billed as “The McCormick from California.” The original McCormick was John McCormick, a well known and popular tenor who performed around the world. John Vale, also a tenor, used McCormick’s reputation to attract attention and sell tickets. This was a common pattern

in vaudeville entertainment when performers and singers attached themselves to a more popular entertainer's reputation and drew in audiences. This is no indication of a lack of talent on the part of the copycats, as is evidenced with Vale. Audiences and critics agreed John Vale had a powerful voice and he was well received across the country as was his pianist.<sup>23</sup> Hildegard's parents were not as enamored with John Vale and the arrangement of Hildegard travelling around the country alone with him. Hildegard had a romance with Vale and her parents were probably right to worry.<sup>24</sup> This arrangement only lasted a short while.

In August 1927, Hildegard was on break from the vaudeville circuit and working at a Charlie Toy's, her favorite Milwaukee Chinese Restaurant. While working there, an agent in Chicago contacted her because he had arranged a job for her as an accompanist for Edith Meiser. Meiser, a Vassar graduate, brought high culture to the masses on the vaudeville stage. Hildegard joined this act and after playing Chicago went west for the first time, taking the train through Utah and Nevada to California. While booked in Los Angeles for five weeks, the New York promoters worried Meiser's act was too sophisticated for audiences in California.<sup>25</sup> The audiences, however, loved the act and embraced both Edith and Hildegard. Meiser travelled for a few years on the vaudeville circuit, but eventually pursued her pet project of producing and writing a radio show about Sherlock Holmes. This popular radio show, *Sherlock Holmes*, became Meiser's claim to fame, most notably because Basil Rathbone played the leading character.<sup>26</sup> Meiser was more intellectual than the average vaudevillian as is evidenced by her abilities as the sole writer for *Sherlock Holmes*. This was further revealed in the interaction between Hildegard and Meiser while travelling. During the time Hildegard



travelled with Meiser, their relationship always remained formal and respectful, with Hildegarde referring to her as “Miss Meiser” even in her diaries.

When Meiser quit the vaudeville stage, she left Hildegarde without work. But thanks to connections Hildegarde made on the road, Oklahoma Bob Albright invited her to audition for a position as an accompanist for his stage production. Though not actually from Oklahoma, Albright produced a Western-themed show which meant Hildegarde wore a leather cowgirl outfit, replete with a large cowboy hat and cowboy boots. Albright, as with many successful headliners, was very demanding and his musicians never satisfied him. Even so, he gave Hildegarde her first opportunity to travel to Europe and broaden her horizons further. Hildegarde thoroughly enjoyed travelling to London. Nothing hampered this, not even when an English cleaner shrunk her leather outfit. The act left for England just weeks after Hildegarde joined them and they spent six weeks in the United Kingdom. After they returned to the U.S. in the middle of May 1928, she remained with Albright another two months before leaving to accompany a vaudevillian dance team, “The De Marcos.”

Hildegarde met Tony De Marco when he appeared on the same bill as Oklahoma Bob Albright. At the time, De Marco’s dance partner was a woman named Nina, he wooed Hildegarde to join his act as a pianist. Albright agreed to Hildegarde leaving, but told her she could never work for him again. The De Marco dance team performed ballroom dancing on stage. Tony De Marco’s ego and anger led to him causing distress for most people involved with the show. He intentionally provoked Nina, his dance partner while performing to make her cry, said mean things to Hildegarde, and regularly put musicians on notice. Though billed as “The De Marcos,” Tony and Nina were not

married at the time Hildegard worked for them. Even though this was a difficult situation and left Hildegard with a terrible impression and opinion of the dancers, she stayed with this act for an entire year, longer than any other. Tony eventually married Nina, then divorced her, married a new dance partner, divorced her, and finally married his final dance partner with whom he found the most success. He later became involved with movies. Tony found his fame with his third and last partner Sally who was the “dance double” for Vivian Leigh in *Gone With The Wind*.<sup>27</sup>

After she left “The De Marcos,” Hildegard performed in a variety of productions and when she was home in New York City, she worked in Irving Berlin’s publishing house and “plugged” songs.<sup>28</sup> For short while in late 1929, she performed with the baseball star, Mickey Cochrane, a famous baseball star who played saxophone in vaudeville.<sup>29</sup> Eventually, Hildegard accompanied a comedienne, Dora “Boots” Early. Starting with Early in 1930, Hildegard once more began travelling around the country. Eventually, through her contacts, Hildegard met and began travelling with the preeminent vaudevillian, Gus Edwards.

This type of impermanence and fluidity between jobs and acts as well as the exposure to other cultures, customs, and people gave the vaudevillians an unique perspective on life. They seemed to readily accept different ethnicities, at least those performers with whom Hildegard associated. Hildegard used ethnic phrases to describe performers, which may not be politically correct for the modern reader but this did not seem to indicate derogatory feelings towards anyone. She and her colleagues readily associated with people of all cultures. They always visited the Chinese and Japanese districts in the cities where they performed.<sup>30</sup> One of the more interesting

aspects of this was the sharing of music traditions from this type of interaction. The 1920s was the Jazz Age, and white performers and musicians eagerly sought out African American jazz in speakeasies, roadhouses, and clubs.

Hildegarde and her colleagues often frequented African American jazz clubs to hear music which was certainly *en vogue* during the late 1920s. Hildegarde loved the jazz she heard when in the audience at clubs like the Apex in Chicago and the Cotton Club in Harlem. The Apex Club at 330 East 35<sup>th</sup> St in Chicago was “The Coziest Night Club in Chicago.”<sup>31</sup> Jimmie Noone was a New Orleans native and student of Sydney Bechet and one of the first proponents of establishing jazz in Chicago.<sup>32</sup> He was the band leader at the Apex Club in the late 1920s and recorded several songs in 1928 with “Jimmie Noone’s Apex Club Orchestra.”<sup>33</sup> The club and Noone attracted a great deal of attention among all musicians in Chicago which led to an interesting mix of whites as well as African Americans in the audience. It did not hurt that the club also sold alcoholic beverages in the midst of Prohibition.<sup>34</sup> In August 1928, while working for the De Marcos dance team, Hildegarde and several of her fellow entertainers including her sister Germaine went to the Apex Club. They saw “a wonderful negro band” where the music included “Four or Five Times,” one of Noone’s most popular songs.<sup>35</sup> The group originally attended these performances there because one of Hildegarde’s friends told the rest of the group about the piano player in the Apex Club band. For that reason she and her co-workers wanted to hear him play.<sup>36</sup>

A few months after seeing the “colored” orchestra at the Apex Club, Hildegarde inserted one of Jimmie Noone’s songs, “Sweet Lorraine,” into her repertoire and started performing it.<sup>37</sup> While Noone did not write this song and others such as Rudy Vallee

recorded it, “Sweet Lorraine” was Noone’s “theme song.” He recorded it on August 25, 1928, just eleven days after Hildegard and her company were at his club.<sup>38</sup> So it is most likely that Noone, not Valle, influenced Hildegard’s mastery of the piece. She impressed many with her rendition of the song, so much so that one of Sophie Tucker’s entourage brought Tucker to hear Hildegard play it during October of 1928 when Tucker was on the bill with Hildegard’s act. This illustrates the connection between musicians and music regardless of race during this era. It also highlights the “borrowing” from African American culture and music which was rampant among white performers during the Jazz Age.<sup>39</sup> Incidentally, the piano player about whom Hildegard and her fellow musicians raved was the legendary Earl Hines who, in 1928, played and recorded with Jimmie Noone. It was no wonder the musicians were impressed.<sup>40</sup> Unfortunately for Chicagoans in 1930, the Apex Club was raided and shut down for selling alcohol.<sup>41</sup>

This was not Hildegard’s only encounter with African American performers in this era. In late 1929 in Chicago, Hildegard and several of her friends went to the Sunset Café, another hot spot and well known venue in Chicago for jazz. Located in the Bronzeville District, the Sunset was and is famous for having hosted several well known jazz musicians such as Louis Armstrong, who was billed in 1928 as “Louis Armstrong and the (Sunset) Stompers.”<sup>42</sup> It was at the height of its popularity when Hildegard attended. At one point in the evening/early morning, Hildegard’s companion arranged for her to perform with the “hot colored orchestra.”<sup>43</sup> Although reluctant at first, Hildegard eventually warmed to idea, and played and sang. She was flattered that the “colored girl singers and entertainers were nice” and liked her performance.<sup>44</sup> This too illustrated the ease with which white and black performers interacted. Later that same

year, while working for Irving Berlin's publishing house "plugging" songs, she performed new music for people looking to purchase material. At that time she rehearsed an African American woman who "raved" about Hildegard's performance and in Hildegard's estimation was "quite a star."<sup>45</sup> At no point during any of her interactions with black singers or musicians did Hildegard use racial slurs or speak negatively about African Americans. Only on one occasion, November 1, 1929, when she and some friends went to the Cotton Club did she use an offensive term in relation to African Americans. She wrote: "went to 'Cotton Club' heard that marvelous niger [sic] band 'Duke Ellingtons' -My! what music—so hot & wonderful—& what a show."<sup>46</sup> That word, although inflammatory, does not seem to be used in a derogatory manner as is indicated by her inability to spell the word and her high praise for the entertainment at the club. The Cotton Club, located in Harlem, was a club in which African American entertainers performed exclusively for white patrons.<sup>47</sup> The Cotton Club emphasized the stereotyped imagery of African Americans. It sold the exotic to white customers. This environment lent itself to differentiating between whites and blacks and it is possible Hildegard's racial slur is a product of that. This does not excuse her use of a racist term, but it is the only time she used the word.

Hildegard spent much of her time socializing in this manner, frequenting night clubs and dating. Her exploration of sexuality in Milwaukee was only an introduction for her explorations while on the road. Away from the scrutiny of her parents, Hildegard went out with numerous men, often dating more than one man at a time. Continuing her pattern from high school and college of notating any romantic physical interaction with "x" or "x's" and the phrases such as "came to my room and chatted" or "had a nice

chat,” Hildegard kept close track of interactions with all of the men she saw. She dated some men due to their looks or their personality, like a rookie baseball player.<sup>48</sup> But more often, she associated with men who could promote her career. Without doubt she led men on, titillating them without giving in to their sexual demands. She also understood she walked a fine line engaging in such activities and by not giving in to their demands, she could damage her career.<sup>49</sup> Hildegard knew she had agency when it came to men. This is best illustrated by her interaction with a man in the business who told her he loved her and wanted to marry her. Hildegard wrote: “What shall I do? Of course I would never –but I hate to tell him because he really can help me to be successful.”<sup>50</sup>

She often had encounters with the men for whom she worked, including Oklahoma Bob Albright and Tony De Marco. Both men chastised Hildegard publically and De Marco’s abusive behavior stressed most everyone around him.<sup>51</sup> Albright, who gave Hildegard many opportunities, also threatened her about her drinking, saying she could not drink and be in his show.<sup>52</sup> Only a few weeks later, he had highballs in her room with her and then “talked x’s.”<sup>53</sup> De Marco never threatened Hildegard about drinking, but continually picked on her in private and in public. Although her personal relationship with him lasted only a short time, she remained with him through much abuse. De Marco, a dancer who played no instruments, constantly criticized her piano skills.<sup>54</sup> Hildegard had opportunities to work with other artists, but chose to remain in a situation with someone who berated everyone around him. Taking this type of abuse became a pattern for Hildegard. Even after she started seeing one man (Henry) more steadily after the stock market crash, he too exhibited erratic behavior. His behavior included: threatening to leave her, showing up unexpectedly while she was out of town,

and even fuming at their friends at parties.<sup>55</sup> In spite of his behavior, she stayed with him because he provided financial stability for her. This meant in spite of the Depression, she was able go out to restaurants to eat and have new clothes which he purchased.

Her relationships throughout her time in vaudeville reflect an uninhibited view of sexuality and its uses. This is not to say Hildegarde had sexual intercourse with men. She feared venereal disease, especially after seeing a health film warning women about its dangers.<sup>56</sup> She even bought a book about how to avoid it. She was warned as well about being a tease. A stranger saw her on the street in New York City and recognized her as a performer. He helped her with her bag into a taxi and told her he knew “what kind of girl I was—a touch me not.” He told her she would never succeed like that, indicating the necessity of acquiescing to the casting couch. Hildegarde said she thought to herself: “you can go to H\_\_[ell] God will help me.” Once, a house detective at a hotel called her to see if she had a man in her room; she did and he ordered him out.<sup>57</sup>

This type of behavior left her parents upset. Her mother worried constantly about her dating and devoting so much time to these men. When she travelled alone with John Vale, her mother begged her to return home because she feared the opinions people formed about such relationships.<sup>58</sup> Ida complained about Hildegarde “going around with fellows so much” and chastised her for it, but it had little effect on Hildegarde, even though she loved her mother and father dearly.<sup>59</sup> In fact, a little over a week after receiving an angry letter from her mother regarding her behavior with men, Hildegarde opted to go see a boyfriend in Ann Arbor, Michigan, instead returning home for her Thanksgiving break. Her mother was furious, especially in light of the fact this young man was not Catholic.<sup>60</sup> Eventually, Ida begged Hildegarde to return home. Ida felt her

daughter had sacrificed her values and religion for her new life. Ida wanted Hildegarde to come home and return to her old self. At the time, Hildegarde was in the process of joining “The De Marcos” and “chatting” regularly with Oklahoma Bob Albright.<sup>61</sup>

Hildegarde had relationships with De Marco and Albright who were married as well as with another married man with seemingly little guilt. When sent a message by her boyfriend’s wife to stay away from her husband, Hildegarde was “astonished” because she cared so little for him.<sup>62</sup>

This is not to say she had no regrets; she did and she often notated “regrets” in her diaries after an “x.”<sup>63</sup> Hildegarde was a practicing Catholic and more often than not, she went to confession, attended mass, and took communion. At times, her “regrets” after an encounter caused her to seek out confession immediately.<sup>64</sup> She consulted priests regularly on the road and at home, but even some of her old priests in Milwaukee seemed to cross a line with her. She often noted in her diary about visiting the priest and saying they “had a nice chat x.”<sup>65</sup> This happened numerous times. When seeking counseling about the non-Catholic performer who almost caused her to miss Thanksgiving, her priest told her “he doesn’t blame anyone for loving me—he even does—but in a different way—But if I marry a non Cath-I should throw his picture away gee what a fine man he is—I wouldn’t give up his friendship for everything in the world—x’s.”<sup>66</sup> This is the same priest who earlier that year advised Hildegarde to “continue my career for 6 years at least and not think of marriage at all.”<sup>67</sup> This was odd advice coming from a Catholic priest.

In spite of her sexual activities, Hildegarde valued her Catholicism a great deal. This did not mean she followed every rule and dictate of the Church, a clear point when



looking at her relationships with men, but it manifested in other ways as well. For instance, it was popular among Hildegarde's friends in vaudeville to conduct séances and read fortunes. This also helped alleviate the boredom of the road. For a while, one of the performers fancied herself a medium and held séances regularly.<sup>68</sup> The medium, aka Ginger, banned Hildegarde from the sessions because she was Catholic on the premise that Catholics did not believe in séances.<sup>69</sup> Hildegarde sought help from a Catholic priest who told her specifically not to participate in any séances because it was not good for her.<sup>70</sup> In spite of this direct recommendation from a priest, Hildegarde participated in them on more than one occasion.<sup>71</sup>

Hildegarde also chose to read books banned by the Catholic Church as well as one banned in all of Britain. Hildegarde showed one of her priests in Milwaukee the list of "forbidden books" she read. Most interesting was the book she got C.O.D. from the Boston Store on February 1, 1929. Hildegarde paid \$5.22, roughly the modern equivalent of \$66.60 for Radclyffe Hall's *Well of Loneliness*. This book was and remained for many years the seminal work about lesbians. Painting "sexual inverts," as they were called, in a sympathetic fashion, the book stirred controversy when first printed in July 1928 in Britain. It was banned by November of the same year, a ban not lifted until 1948.<sup>72</sup> When Hildegarde bought the book on February 1, the book was on trial in New York City for being obscene.<sup>73</sup> Since December of 1928, the *New York Times* had been reporting on this case of obscenity and printed articles that discussed lesbian identity openly. By this time, though still travelling, Hildegarde's home base was New York City and there is little doubt she was aware of the news about the trial. Yet, in spite of the controversy, she sought out the book and purchased it. When she finished

reading it, she wrote: “I honestly don’t understand why that book should be suppressed. It is a marvelous book—beautifully written and true to life—So much as that one readily sympathizes with an invert such as Stephen was.”<sup>74</sup> (Stephen, a woman, was the lead character in the book.) Hildegard then passed the book on to a friend in Milwaukee. It is clear from her “review” of the book that she understood the controversy surrounding it, and did not care.

It was during this time in Hildegard’s life that she met Anna Sosenko. She was travelling with Dora Early to Camden, New Jersey, when her path crossed with Anna. Hildegard and Dora checked into a rooming house and on January 12, 1930, they met Anna. The rooming house was owned and operated by Anna’s mother and the Sosenko family lived and worked there. Though both Hildy and Dora were irritated with Anna’s mother, both were immediately impressed with Anna’s intellect and wit. Anna and Hildegard had a few similarities in their backgrounds. Both were children of immigrant households and both had work ethic reflecting that. The similarities ended there. While Hildegard came from the upper middle class, Anna’s Russian Jewish immigrant family was poor and all members struggled to support the family. Soon after returning home to New York City, Hildegard received a birthday card from Anna and a few weeks after that, Anna surprised them with a personal visit. Several visits followed. By March, Hildegard understood that Anna was infatuated with her. After talking with her for two hours, Hildegard wrote in her diary: “How that girl loves me.”<sup>75</sup> Clearly she understood that Anna had more than just a passing interest in her. Throughout the next year, Hildy and Anna saw each other frequently. When Hildegard had professional photos made, she sent the sophisticated one to Anna. They wrote to each other often and

Hildegarde at one point sent a seventeen page letter to her. Late in the 1930, Anna stayed so long with Hildegarde and Dora while they were packing to leave town that they felt Anna was a pest, but soon after, Hildegarde wrote her another long letter. What is certain about the relationship is that both Anna and Hildegarde desired to keep the friendship close. Hildegarde understood Anna's feelings toward her and opted to fuel those feelings. By 1932, while Hildegarde was with Gus Edwards, the women were living together and Anna was being introduced at functions where Hildegarde performed.<sup>76</sup>

### **A German Lass**

Sometime between the January and March 1931, Hildegarde's career took a definite turn. During those few months, Hildegarde started working in a Gus Edwards show titled "New Stars on Parade." This show featured "youthful, talented discoveries." In this production Hildegarde was cast in the role as a "dialect comedienne" and billed as someone who "puts on a cute Dutch dialect."<sup>77</sup> At the time, Edwards was so powerful that he debuted his new act at the Palace Theater in New York City which was then the pinnacle of success in vaudeville. Hildegarde toured the RKO circuit while performing with Edwards and often was listed on the bill. This was a different level of performance for her as a singing comedienne and presumably acting rather than simply accompanying other performers or herself on the piano. Her time with Gus Edwards indelibly changed Hildegarde's path and stage persona. It was Edwards who encouraged Hildegarde to drop her last name and be known simply as Hildegarde and he created her "foreign"

identity. Most importantly, Edwards gave her the opportunity to be introduced to important figures in the entertainment industry.

Gus Edwards' long and successful career in show business garnered him the title of "The Star Maker."<sup>78</sup> An immigrant born in 1879, Edwards started in vaudeville early and by the time he was twenty-years old, he owned his own publishing company.<sup>79</sup> Known for writing several songs considered standards such as "By the Light of the Silvery Moon" and "School Days," Edwards grew into the role of "talent scout" by incorporating new talent into his vaudeville shows that featured Edwards as producer, director, writer, and performer.<sup>80</sup> Although he often focused on children's acts, like a true vaudevillian, Edwards' performances and shows could include anything. He was comfortable performing with or without a supporting cast.<sup>81</sup> He was so well known that in 1939, Paramount Studios released the movie, *The Star Maker*, a fictionalized account of Edwards's life with Bing Crosby playing Edwards. The list of stars that Edwards discovered reads like a "who's who" of the entertainment industry, including Groucho Marx, Ray Bolger, Eddie Cantor, Walter Winchell, and Hildegarde.<sup>82</sup>

Apparently, Hildegarde made an impression with Gus Edwards in her role of the singing comedienne. On August 8, 1931, she debuted in a new version of "New Stars on Parade." This time, however, was different. Hildegarde and her comic partner Eddie Garr headlined the bill.<sup>83</sup> Most importantly, in this act she completed her transformation from an American to a German, without doubt at the hands of Edwards. The makeover began with her first foray in an Edwards' production when she dropped her last name and became known only as Hildegarde. By the time the new show opened with Hildegarde as a main attraction, her entire background and persona changed from a Milwaukee girl to a

German immigrant whose family immigrated to the United States when Hildegarde was six-years old.

Within a week of her debut as co-lead in the production, Hildegarde was featured in newspaper stories that carried photographs of her and told the story of her German heritage. “There is nothing assumed about that broad German accent,” relates an article from *The Post-Standard* in Syracuse, New York. It continues, saying Hildegarde was “Born in Germany, transported to this country at the age of 6 to be brought up in Milwaukee, the Deutschland of America.”<sup>84</sup> For the deception to be complete, it was necessary for Hildegarde to keep up the act backstage as well, which apparently she did well. One writer in Rochester, New York assured his readers that Hildegarde’s German accent was not simply for stage or an “affectation” because she “talks that way offstage as well.”<sup>85</sup> Both of these articles stressed that Hildegarde’s accent remained so strong because she spoke more in German while growing up. One stressed that she only spoke English “to strangers.”

*Fraulein* Hildegarde had opportunities that Hildegarde Sell did not. While travelling the vaudeville circuits over the years, newspapers occasionally mentioned her in a few lines regarding the shows in which she performed. Only her hometown papers ran articles specifically focusing on Hildegarde and her career. After her transformation Hildegarde’s marketability increased. Suddenly her image and name appeared in newspapers wherever she performed. This exposure included radio broadcasts as well. She appeared on the radio several times while travelling the vaudeville circuit, but as the “German Invader” as one paper called her, she attracted the attention of NBC.<sup>86</sup> The NBC affiliate in Cleveland scheduled her for three appearances during her time in town.

This was an unusual amount of air time since other performers were only allocated one broadcast performance while entertaining in the city.<sup>87</sup>

Only a few months into the role of the “German singer,” Hildegard’s popularity blossomed. By early October 1931, Hildegard was featured in an advertisement for Herbert B. Christensen Jewelers in St. Paul, Minnesota. The jeweler, working in conjunction with the RKO Orpheum Theater, had a promotion to give away a diamond ring at the theater. They used Hildegard’s photograph with the caption, “Fraulein Hildegard, The RKO Orpheum star with Gus Edwards’ Review Will Appear in Our Store.” This is a clear indication of her popularity and of her ability to draw crowds even at this early stage of her career. Not long after this promotion, Hildegard’s photo dominated many of the advertisements for the show. The *Tacoma Daily Ledger* on November 10, 1931 ran a large picture of her with the headline “Featured on Program, Held Over at Orpheum.” Just the day before in the same paper, Hildegard’s face dominated the advertisement with large bold letters proclaiming “HELD OVER!” This trend continued while she performed along the West coast. In San Francisco, similar headlines greeted readers of the *San Francisco News* and *San Francisco Call-Bulletin* with proclamations of her “Teutonic Wit” and of her being “one of the great ‘finds’ of the season.”<sup>88</sup>

And so this charade continued across the country as the show wove its way back to the East coast. One of the most bizarre stories of Hildegard’s immigrant status emerged when the troupe arrived in Des Moines, Iowa. Hildegard was featured prominently in a newspaper article posing with a well-known local attorney and another man who was the director of a community theater. The caption under the photo indicated

that “Fraulein Hildegarde, German singer and actress” had captured the hearts of these perennial bachelors. It also informed the readers that Hildegarde and the director, Fred Morrow, “first met in Germany several years ago.” Accompanying the photograph was a completely fabricated story involving Hildegarde and Fred Morrow. The premise was that Morrow was biking through Europe and met Hildegarde “singing in a Munich music house.” The article gave a vague time frame indicating only that this initial meeting took place “three years ago.”<sup>89</sup> Hildegarde provided a thorough daily account of her life and work in her diaries from 1928 and 1929. In 1928, for about a month and a half, she performed in England and Scotland, but never ventured to the Continent. At no time in 1929 was Hildegarde in Europe performing. Her only travels out of the country in 1929 was to perform in Canada. In fact, before she embarked on her sojourn for Europe in 1933, she had visited Europe only once with Oklahoma Bob Albright. This same story of the meeting in Germany was repeated in the *Des Moines Register*. While this was certainly an interesting marketing tool, it went beyond creative public relations by incorporating a local director in Council Bluffs, Iowa into the “German” lie. For everyone involved, the motivating factor was most likely selling tickets and filling seats.

Hildegarde’s popularity grew throughout the time she travelled with “New Stars on Parade.” Newspapers continued to feature her in stories and articles, and radio programs loved to have her as a guest, presumably because their listeners loved her too. She was the “guest artist of the week” on a popular radio program in Philadelphia where she was billed as “the New Song Sensation from Germany.”<sup>90</sup> In Baltimore, she hosted a charity event for the Titan Club and the event had good publicity.<sup>91</sup> By May 1932, one reporter predicted that Hildegarde would be the “talk of the town” and a Broadway

sensation.<sup>92</sup> Most importantly, her growing popularity led to her being discussed in *Billboard*, one of the most important publications in the entertainment world.<sup>93</sup> Soon, Gus Edwards began personally taking Hildegard to private parties to introduce her to the press and other important figures in the entertainment industry.<sup>94</sup> For up and coming entertainers, parties held in the private homes of the rich and famous were important opportunities because they afforded the artists the chance to audition as well as find support from the press, agents, and socialites who could help their careers.

A good example of the opportunities available from mingling with socialites occurred in 1932. In May, Edwards introduced Hildegard at a Press Agents Benefit where she performed solo and sang three songs.<sup>95</sup> Two nights later, a columnist who was impressed with Hildegard at the Press Agents event invited her and Edwards to be the “guests of honor” at a club. At this event Hildegard met Jules Glaenger, the vice-president of Cartier’s.<sup>96</sup> Glaenger was known as a perennial host and associated with many well-known celebrities.<sup>97</sup> Two nights after meeting Glaenger, Hildegard was the “guest of honor” at his home for a party.<sup>98</sup> The next week, Glaenger took her to a party at the home of socialite William Rhineland Stewart, the son of a noted philanthropist of the same name.<sup>99</sup> It was through Stewart and Glaenger that Hildegard met and performed for such luminaries such as Cole Porter and George Gershwin. Incidentally, playing for George Gershwin was one of the only times Hildegard ever admitted to being nervous.<sup>100</sup>

With all of these social engagements, it is difficult to believe Hildegard kept up her German act and accent all the time. This means journalists were “in” on the secret and actively engaged in perpetuating the invented persona, especially when they



continued to describe her as born in Kiel, Germany.<sup>101</sup> Or as in one instance, a journalist felt, “Berlin should have a medal, a wreath, a kiss, or something, at least a nice bouquet for Hildegard.”<sup>102</sup> Obviously, all involved understood the necessity of perpetuating stories to keep the public intrigued and purchasing tickets to shows. Most importantly, Hildegard’s European identity set her apart from the general society and created her as the “other,” which also meant the standard expectations of “American” women did not apply to her.<sup>103</sup>

The stories about Hildegard’s European birth were often careful to point out that when she immigrated to the United States, she came to Milwaukee. Interestingly enough, her “otherness” was aided by the fact of her Milwaukee background. This was a town that was continuously set aside from the rest of the United States because of its Germaness. Journalists made the distinction that Milwaukee was different than the rest of the country. Described as “the Deutschland of America,” Milwaukee was often set apart from the rest of the nation.<sup>104</sup> In Dallas, Milwaukee was interchangeable with Germany, as Hildegard was “either directly from Deutschland or at least Milwaukee.”<sup>105</sup> And in Rochester, New York, one reporter declared:

Strangely enough Hildegard has lived in this country (I beg the indulgence of Prohibitionists who do not include Milwaukee in their conception of the United States)...and has always talked more of her native tongue than English at home. Things are like that in Milwaukee you know.<sup>106</sup>

The combination of her German heritage and upbringing in Milwaukee kept Hildegard on the fringe of American expectations and served her well after she and Anna returned from three years performing in Europe.

It is impossible to overlook the genius of Gus Edwards in creating a vaudeville persona that mimicked so closely one of Paramount Pictures newest stars and recent German immigrant, Marlene Dietrich. Dietrich's press literally made her a sensation overnight in the United States. Dietrich arrived in the United States amid fanfare in April 1930, just days after her debut in *The Blue Angel* in Berlin.<sup>107</sup> Fraulein Dietrich literally left the curtain calls in Berlin to sail for the United States and discuss her contract with Paramount. Eight months after arriving in the United States, Dietrich made her American movie debut in *Morocco* opposite Gary Cooper.<sup>108</sup> Paramount intended to Americanize Dietrich, so they waited until *Morocco* opened in theaters before releasing *The Blue Angel*, a German film.<sup>109</sup> Her stardom was established immediately as was an imagined rivalry between Dietrich and Greta Garbo, another famous European immigrant.<sup>110</sup> By the time Hildegard opened with Gus Edwards, Dietrich was a star and Greta Garbo was "creating a new Garbo" in a movie in which she spoke German.<sup>111</sup> It is not difficult to see the exploitative advantages of providing another blonde singing German girl in the more accessible environment of a vaudeville stage. Hildegard, unlike Dietrich needed no Americanization since she grew up in the "nearly" American city of Milwaukee. No matter whose idea it was to capitalize on Dietrich's fame, it worked. What is certain is the ruse of Hildegard's German origins became an integral part of her stage persona until the point she left for the London cabaret and reclaimed her American identity.

### **Americans in Paris**

On August 31, 1933, Hildegard and Anna set sail for London on the S.S. Bremen.<sup>112</sup> The women opted to travel in style on the fastest ocean liner traversing the

Atlantic in 1933.<sup>113</sup> In spite of the world-wide depression, Hildegarde and Anna had the finances to travel to London. What is a curiosity is their reason for moving to Europe in light of Hildegarde's apparent profitable relationship with Gus Edwards and her obvious success in the United States. There are no extant diaries and scarce notations in any scrapbook for this time period so it is difficult to know the exact reasoning behind this decision or if they meant to stay in Europe for an extended period of time.

Two factors most likely had a great impact on this move. On March 6, 1933, Charles Sell, Hildegarde's father, died. Charles suffered for several years with bladder cancer. Without doubt his passing was a difficult experience for Hildegarde. Even though no account of Hildegarde's thoughts from this time is available, it was evident from the response to her father's illness that this was a traumatic event in her life. When she found out about his terminal illness, she expressed great pain about seeing him suffer and her sorrow for her mother.<sup>114</sup> Long after his death, she mourned this loss in her life.<sup>115</sup> This probably was not the reason they decided to leave the country, but it would certainly have contributed to Hildegarde's mindset at the time.

Another force contributing to this major decision was a growing trend for American performers to cross the Atlantic and perform in London. In the early 1930s, American performers dominated the London stage. Promoters for English productions would have been interested in her. During the spring of 1933, the forecast for Hildegarde's career was very positive. Not only was she a highly touted protégé of Edwards, but many forecast Hildegarde as the "talk of the town" for the next Broadway season. Yet in spite of the success in the U.S., the women opted to try the stage in Europe. Most likely, Anna secured a contract for Hildegarde to perform in England.

London in 1933 was in the throes of the Great Depression and Britain was struggling with approximately three million British without jobs.<sup>116</sup> Fresh off of the gold standard, England was in crisis financially.<sup>117</sup> Poverty was so widespread in London in the early 1930s that in the city alone there were approximately 500,000 poverty stricken people.<sup>118</sup> Many people lived in despicable conditions that were reminiscent of the worst that Victorian London had to offer the poor.<sup>119</sup> Living alongside the impoverished and those living below the poverty line were the aristocrats, socialites, and those known as the “Bright Young People.” These “Bright Young People” lived in a world far apart from the slums.<sup>120</sup> Their lives were filled with parties, socializing, and clubs. Some were writers and artists, but all lived a life of indulgence apart from the accepted behavior of the establishment.<sup>121</sup> The world of socialites bled over into the clubs of London and thus set the London cabaret far apart from the cabarets of other major European cities, in particular Paris and Berlin.<sup>122</sup> Whereas in Paris and Berlin, the cabaret served as a place for artists and writers to socialize and where clever performers expressed dissident attitudes towards government. In London the performers very often were socialites as well.<sup>123</sup> Even British royalty, in particular the Prince of Wales, frequented the cabarets and clubs. This changed in the years after the Nazi takeover of Germany in 1933 when German artists fled Berlin into other major urban areas of the continent, but by the time Hildegard and Anna arrived in London in the summer of 1933, the London cabaret scene still catered to the elite.<sup>124</sup>

Hildegard’s first gigs in London were in two fashionable West End Clubs. The West End of London was and is the center of entertainment in London. Within a very small area, several famous sites such as Covent Garden, Piccadilly Circus, and Leicester

Square are found. On September 18, 1933, Hildegard, “America’s Foremost Cabaret Artiste,” opened at the Café Anglais in Leicester Square, in her “First Appearance in England.”<sup>125</sup> The transformation was complete: Hildegard, the German Lass had crossed the Atlantic and become an American cabaret star. Even though this was not her first appearance in England, it was her first performance in England as a “star.” Hildegard was transformed in more than one way. When she appeared at Café Anglais, she made her entrance, took her seat at piano, and not only sang, but proceeded to conduct the orchestra.<sup>126</sup> This was a sight to which few were accustomed in the 1930s. It was unusual enough that reportedly it caused customers’ “eyes to pop out like hat pegs.”<sup>127</sup> Her reception at the Café de Paris, also on the West End, was just as positive.

The Café de Paris, a notorious meeting place for high society and royalty (including once again the Prince of Wales) hosted many notable performers and guests including Eartha Kitt, Noel Coward, and Cole Porter.<sup>128</sup> When Hildegard opened there on October 6, 1933, she went on at ten o’clock in the evening after a supper time performance by Josephine Baker. This was the first time Baker played in London since 1928.<sup>129</sup> Hildegard and Anna formed a friendship with Josephine and her husband Pepito that would last over the next several years. This must have been a coup for Anna and Hildegard to secure a spot on a bill with Josephine Baker, especially being so new to Europe. The fact Josephine and Hildegard appeared together highlights the difference between performing in Europe and performing in the United States. Europeans cared little about the race of a performer and African American performers enjoyed luxuries abroad that were strictly forbidden at home. Several African American jazz artists performed in London in the spring and summer of 1933. Cab Calloway and Duke

Ellington both had great success that summer, and Ellington performed with his Cotton Club orchestra to audiences who were more than eager to see Ellington and hear him perform.<sup>130</sup> The Prince of Wales was so impressed with Ellington that he had a “jam session” with him.<sup>131</sup>

Londoners loved American performers, black and white, and Hildegard was no exception. By early October 1933, she was the focus of an article in *Melody Maker*.<sup>132</sup> *Melody Maker* was the only English magazine at the time providing news specifically about jazz music.<sup>133</sup> The article provided a glimpse of Hildegard’s growing reputation in London. According to this article, she enjoyed “great success” for the four weeks at the Café Anglais and Café de Paris. It also stated that Hildegard was contracted to record with Columbia. This same information was presented in *The Sound Wave* and *The Gramophone Journal*, two of the prominent trade papers in Britain.<sup>134</sup> Both the *Sound Wave* and *Gramophone* predicted Hildegard’s Columbia record to be released in mid-December, was destined to become “vogue.”<sup>135</sup> Columbia Records advertised: “‘Hildegard’ is London’s Singing Sensation.” The company thought that it had secured “A Real Scoop” and that “her deliciously intimate manner of singing—as though she were singing to you and you alone” would win over any all who heard her.<sup>136</sup> Hildegard singing to “you and you alone” is a sentiment repeated frequently throughout her career. Part of that is due to Anna’s coaching which helped Hildegard create an intimate environment for her audience. Anna also received attention in London and many articles spoke of her as Hildegard’s friend who came with her to Europe and on her own as a songwriter. It was Anna who composed several of Hildegard’s most popular numbers and was fast gaining a reputation for writing popular songs. In late 1933, Josephine

Baker used two of Anna's songs in her new show.<sup>137</sup> No doubt this opportunity arose from Hildegard and Anna meeting Josephine so soon after arriving in Europe.

Josephine's rendition of Anna's song, "Ask Your Heart," gained enough popularity that Chappell & Co. published the sheet music for it in late 1933.<sup>138</sup> Most importantly, when published, this sheet music had Hildegard's picture on the front.

Hildegard's Columbia record was aided by two film shorts she recorded for Pathé Pictorial in late 1933. Pathé Pictorial was a cinemagazine produced by British Pathé and its film shorts were shown in movie theaters. They highlighted entertainment and cultural news.<sup>139</sup> Her first short was a recording of the song "I Was in the Mood" which was issued on November 9, 1933.<sup>140</sup> The short opens with a still photograph of Hildegard at the piano, with the headline, "Now Here comes Hildegard, (and a piano) (from Café de Paris, etc.)."<sup>141</sup> The film begins with Hildegard playing the introduction for her piece, and she is noticeably much thinner than publicity photographs taken in the early 1930s. Hildegard is seated at a grand piano in a particularly revealing, sequined, spaghetti strapped evening gown. Although there is no shot of her from the back, it is obviously a backless dress. The performance showcased her piano skills, personality, and charisma. "I Was in the Mood" is an uptempo song about sex and the lust of a girl and a boy. The girl in the song was as interested in sex as the boy and after seeking permission from her parents, they marry, though the song is clear that they were in the mood for something other than marriage. An interesting perspective though is given at the end of the song of the woman's view point of view: "A fool I am I push a Pram/ cuz I was in the mood/ I was in the mood/ I was in the mood mmm hmmm." This sentiment is and was interesting because it mirrored Hildegard's personal distaste regarding having

children.<sup>142</sup> It also mirrored the attitudes of many of Hildegarde's contemporaries who were still enjoying a more carefree attitude towards sex and marriage.

Hildegarde's second recording for Pathé Pictorial was the song "Trouble in Paradise" released on January 1, 1934. "Trouble in Paradise" was filmed on the same day as "I Was in the Mood," but is a slower paced mournful song about lost love. Hildegarde's black evening gown for this short was less revealing but just as glamorous with large ruffles made out of a shiny material as straps. "Trouble in Paradise" opened just as "I Was in the Mood" with a photograph of Hildegarde sitting at the piano with the advertisement for the Café de Paris. Similarly, it also shows Hildegarde skill at the piano and her emotive ability and very expressive face. Curiously, neither of the recordings were songs written by Anna even though her songs were mentioned in articles about Hildegarde during the same time period. Both of the songs in the film shorts were mentioned in these articles as well, but here Anna was praised for "Ask Your Heart," "Why Don't They Leave Us Alone?," and "Time Was."

Both Anna and Hildegarde were well received in London by the critics, so their move to Paris in November 1933 was curious. Opening on "Armistice Night," November 11, the same day as the Pathé release of *I Was in the Mood*, Hildegarde charmed a packed house at the 1830 Club in Paris.<sup>143</sup> Now the headliner and billed as "La Grande Vendette de New-York et Londres," Hildegarde inserted herself into the inter-war years of famed Parisian nightlife. Anna too was gaining in fame and given nearly equal billing at the 1830 Club with advertisements sporting the bold announcement that Hildegarde was performing, "Dans Son Répertoire Par Anna Sosenko."<sup>144</sup> Just one month later, *The Sound Wave* proclaimed Hildegarde as: "The



biggest success Paris has had for a long time.” Stories of Hildegarde’s first performance also made Parisian editions of American papers like the *New York Herald* and the *Chicago Tribune* which were dedicated to carrying stories about American socialites.<sup>145</sup> The 1830 Club was reputed to have gone out of business overnight, but Hildegarde immediately began playing at the Casanova Club. She thereby cemented herself within the culture of cabaret and night clubs in Paris, but also within the social world of the so called exiled White Russians who opened several well heeled cabarets in Paris, including the Casanova.<sup>146</sup>

Hildegarde’s Armistice Day premier was an interesting day for a cabaret debut amidst the great sorrow that day marked for Paris and across France. Armistice Day in France was a commemoration of death rather than victory.<sup>147</sup> Forty-five percent of French men mobilized for World War I, and at the end of the war, the country lost 1,400,000 soldiers, had 500,000 civilian casualties, and had 1,700,000 wounded returning home.<sup>148</sup> The loss of life had a lasting and devastating effect on the population which led to naming of the 1930s in France as the “Hollow Years.” The so-called Hollow Years were empty because of the lowered number of births during the Great War left France with few to draft into armed services in the 1930s.<sup>149</sup> The French continued to enjoy the relative prosperity of the 1920s after the Great Depression adversely affected the rest of Europe.<sup>150</sup> Until 1931, Paris continued in a post-war reverie which included economic growth that began in 1926 and included such luxuries as a balanced budget.<sup>151</sup> After the Depression began, the government neglected to act for a year and then in only a limited fashion.<sup>152</sup> The consequence was France’s experience lasted longer and this recovery was slower than in most of Europe.<sup>153</sup> For this reason, Paris in the 1930s was vastly

different than the previous decade. In spite of this, the City of Lights maintained a vibrant nightlife and culture that catered to all parts of society, from artists and socialites to American performers and Russian émigrés. It was a combination of all of these that created the life into which Anna and Hildegarde entered at the 1830 Club.

On December 12, 1933, Hildegarde began a two month contract at the Casanova Club with the “Orchestre Tzigane-Tango.”<sup>154</sup> Even though new French rules dictated more French musicians to be employed, the exotic lure of the Tzigane or Gypsy orchestra remained a lure for customers.<sup>155</sup> The Gypsy musicians were in high demand and concentrated particularly in the clubs opened by the White Russians. The White Russians began flooding into France and in particular into Paris in 1919 after the Russian Revolution. Soon, 60,000 of the upper class—princes, and princesses who no longer had titles or a country in which to live—were thriving in Paris.<sup>156</sup> Here they found a receptive city already sporting a considerable immigrant community and almost immediately established themselves in the realm of night-clubs. They opened numerous clubs and stocked them with local and immigrant Gypsy musicians.<sup>157</sup> One of the selling points for the Russian night-clubs was that customers were served by former socialites and high ranking Russians. For instance, it was possible that the person who cooked your meal was the former chef of the Tsar or the Tsar’s uncle might be checking your hat or the women’s room attendant was a member of the “famous Obelensky family, related to the imperial clan.”<sup>158</sup>

The Casanova Club opened in 1926 during prosperous times in Paris and operated under a man known only as Nokolai. The Casanova, as with many clubs in Paris, was decorated and based on a theme. For the Casanova, the ambiance centered on the

eighteenth-century style from the era of the real Casanova for whom the club was named. No doubt the name of the club was well thought out. Within the club, the waiters and doormen dressed in costume and the interior was draped in expensive cloth. Adding to the ambiance was the possibility awaiting guests that when they entered that they too might be served by Russians of high rank. The Casanova Club illustrated the ironies of Paris in the 1930s. It was a Russian owned club, in France, decorated in eighteenth-century Venetian style, with former socialites taking your coat. The absurdity fit well within the culture of the Parisian nightlife rife with jazz, aristocrats, artists, and general decadence. This night-time world seemed far apart from the realities of politics and economics of the day. In fact, the daytime world revolving around high-culture tended to blame the night life, in particular the influence of jazz, with the degradation of French culture and the watering down, so to speak, of Frenchness.<sup>159</sup>

Hildegarde's first engagement at the Casanova was to last for two months, from December 12, 1933 until sometime presumably in mid-February 1933. The Casanova became inextricably linked with Hildegarde and her legacy, for it was allegedly at the Casanova that King Gustaf V of Sweden had requested to see Hildegarde perform to the horror of the manager who, unbeknownst to the King, had fired her. Or so the story goes. This was the official story as to how Hildegarde found success in Europe. It became such a part of her life that upon her death obituaries around the world printed this detail ad nauseum. Certainly it is possible this happened between May and August 1934, a time-period for which evidence is lacking. But in light of Hildegarde's extremely positive reception and Anna's growing reputation as a songwriter (which was evidenced by her feature length article on jazz published in *Melody Maker* in January 1933), it is doubtful

they struggled to find work for Hildegarde in Paris. In fact, in an article written by Hildegarde for an English magazine in 1937, she reported that she worked at Casanova for an entire year.<sup>160</sup>

Although she claimed to be grateful for work at the Casanova Club, Hildegarde secretly hated it and much preferred some of the other places she performed.<sup>161</sup> One of her preferred places was another Russian club called Shéhérazade. This club opened in December 1927 and its décor meant to replicate the theme of the ballet of the same name. The ballet, written by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, was set in an exoticized version of the Middle East. The ballet premiered in Paris in 1910, but seemed to fit in with the nightlife of Paris in the 1930s. The premise for the ballet was the story of the *Arabian Nights* with music inspired by the Russian folk tradition, written, danced, and directed by Russians and premiering in Paris.<sup>162</sup> For Parisians, the absurdity was lost and the ballet loved. What better place to capitalize on this amalgam of culture than Paris in the jazz age? The inside of the club was meant to replicate the tent of a sheik. Opulent cloth flowed from the ceiling down the walls to create the feeling of being in a tent. Portions of the club intended to mimic the inside of a mosque with high arched ceilings and twisted columns. Even the front of the club looked exotic with a high pointed arching doorframe. Inside, guests dined on fine dishes and fine meals served by severe faced waiters often dressed as Cossacks and often sporting “Russian” styled facial hair. The club, like most of the other Parisian night clubs, was small and intimate. It was easy to see how performing in such a place helped Hildegarde, who opened there in 1934 developing a specialized style which drew the audience into the performance.<sup>163</sup>

Hildegarde's favorite venue in Paris was a club called *Le Bœuf sur le Toit*, which translates to "The Ox of the Roof," or often as "the Nothin Doing Club" or "Nothing Doing Bar."<sup>164</sup> This club opened in 1922. Its name was taken from a recently popular act, written by Darius Milhaud and Jean Cocteau, which was performance art that pushed boundaries with modernistic music and jerky pantomime dance movements.<sup>165</sup> The play combined the older traditional style of performance with the new sophisticated styles that emerged from the cabaret. It was a perfect theme for a new cabaret, and became the haute couture of night clubs in Paris attracting artists and musicians including the likes of Pablo Picasso, Maurice Ravel, and Maurice Chevalier.<sup>166</sup> It was in this atmosphere where Hildegarde found her stage persona performing and Anna became an established songwriter.

Anna's song, "Darling Je Vous Aime Beaucoup," attracted attention immediately from the audiences in cabarets. The song was about "an English boy who falls in love with a French girl."<sup>167</sup> The language barrier resulted in lyrics that were a mixture of French and English sung over an upbeat fox-trot rhythm and catchy tune. "Je suis ici pas très long/ Mais s'il vous plait écoute my song/ Vous avez un grand appeal/ to speak my heart c'est difficile/ Permettez moi to expliquer/ Dans my own peculiar way/ Exactly what mon cœur would say/ Darling je vous aime beaucoup/ Je ne sais pas what to do/ vous avez completely stolen my heart" and so the song continues.<sup>168</sup> At the time the song debuted, Hildegarde performed at both *Shéhérazade* and *Bœuf sur le Toit*, and crowds at both clubs raved about the piece.<sup>169</sup> Crowds requested the "French English song" as it was known, and very soon after its debut, it was "getting to be a big hit."<sup>170</sup> "Darling" fit well within the mixed cultures and languages of the night-club atmosphere.

Thanks to the influence of jazz and the influx of jazz musicians and American aristocrats, the Parisian lexicon evolved to include American English slang and words.<sup>171</sup> Parisian ears grew accustomed to hearing and using phrases that combined both English and French words. When they first heard “Darling,” the lyrics rang true for many who heard it, be they locals or tourists. Reputedly written by Anna while she and Hildegard biked in the French countryside, the song became beloved and attracted much attention from well-known people in show business. Maurice Chevalier loved the piece and wanted it performed at the Casino de Paris, but refused to sing it himself because he was not the first to perform it. Hildegard debuted the song just after returning from a contract in Marseilles, so it is possible the song’s creation happened just as recounted. What is certain is that Anna understood the importance of capitalizing on its popularity in order to seize as many opportunities for her and Hildegard as possible.

It is clear Anna had an innate sense of business and understood the necessity of maintaining control of her work and Hildegard. That was evident with her copywriting “Ask Your Heart” as well as several other songs so early in their stay in London. Her abilities and brazenness she used to promote Hildegard was at times, unbelievable. For instance, in November 1934, the time period when “Darling” was first noticed, a man came to see Hildegard representing UFA, a German film company and the largest film corporation in Europe. This man informed Hildegard that the president of the company saw Hildegard perform two times at the Casanova and felt she was perfect for a German film called *Barcarolle*. The next day, the UFA representative returned and met with Anna. During the meeting, Anna insisted on a large advance to fund travel out of the country. Hildegard observed that the man disliked Anna. Hildegard took it upon

herself to visit the representative on her own, and at that point, he called the home office in Berlin. Hildegard spoke with one of their executives. Finally, after a few more meetings, an advance of 6000 francs was agreed upon for Hildegard to travel to Berlin for the filming of *Barcarolle*.<sup>172</sup>

This exchange on the surface appears to be like any other between a manager, artist, and a corporation, except by the time Anna and Hildegard began talks with UFA the company was part and parcel of the propaganda machine of the Nazi party. Most assuredly, the people with whom Anna and Hildegard interacted were Nazis. Within days of taking power, Hitler established the office of National Education and Propaganda with Joseph Goebbels at the helm.<sup>173</sup> Almost immediately the Nazis created blacklists of Jews to be removed from UFA.<sup>174</sup> It is impossible to imagine this information escaped the attention of Hildegard or Anna, especially not Anna. Obviously, Anna kept abreast of current trends in entertainment as did Hildegard; this is evidenced by the numerous clippings of the major trade papers, *Billboard* and *Variety*. Long before Anna and Hildegard sailed for Europe, *Variety* published articles about the purging of Jews from the arts in Germany. In early May 1933, *Variety* published “Jewish Composer Ban by Nazis Flattens Radio,” an article elaborating on the new ban of anything written by Jewish composers.<sup>175</sup> The ban extended to radio and any performance venue. A few weeks later, *Variety* published a similar article this time carrying the story of the company that represented American publishers in Germany which fired all of its Jewish employees due to the no Jew order” from the government.<sup>176</sup> With such stories making *Variety*, it is doubtful Anna was unaware of the situation in Berlin. Several points are important about this story. Because Anna was Jewish, none of Hildegard’s recordings

or any music written by Anna would have been allowed on the radio or performed in music halls or cabarets. Most of the people who wanted to hire Hildegard, understood that the business end of her career was handled by Anna and no one else. So when the representative approached Hildegard and showed obvious disdain for Anna, it is very likely because she was Jewish.

Although Hildegard felt once UFA agreed to the 6000 franc advance she might be leaving within days, the deal never went through with no explanation by Hildegard about the events surrounding the offer. In fact, she never mentioned UFA again in her diary. UFA made the film *Barcarolle* without Hildegard and released it in 1935. It is easy to see the reasoning behind UFA wanting Hildegard for the movie. She had the ideal “look” with blonde hair, blue eyes and German heritage, plus being a German American would make her even more of a coup for UFA. Instead of Hildegard, a Czech actress named Lida Baarova appeared as the lead. Incidentally, Lida became a mistress of Goebbels and his infatuation with her caused great scandal and almost ended his marriage and career.<sup>177</sup> This was Hildegard’s only interaction with Nazis while in Europe, but serves as an example of the managerial skills of Anna and her sense of the necessities for success in show business, even if it meant dealing with Nazis.

Anna made the business end of Hildegard’s career work. Someone that will stand toe to toe with Nazis—who were obviously anti-Semitic— would do the same with Pathé Pictorial or with BBC or simply negotiating salary. Anna argued and fought to get Hildegard the best pay for performing. She fought with the owner of *Shéhérazade* until she got him to agree to double his original offer and pay her 200 francs (roughly \$14.00 at the time) a night.<sup>178</sup> She sometimes booked Hildegard at two clubs at once often



resulting in Hildegarde playing both clubs in a single night. At one point, Anna became angry at the owner of Casanova and told him Hildegarde was through at his club. This was a bold move because the Casanova was a “hot spot” in Paris, but by this time, Hildegarde’s popularity was such that the two women could pick where she performed. Hildegarde’s disdain for Casanova meant she cared little that Anna removed her from this atmosphere. Anna’s persistence paid off frequently. At one point she requested 100,000 francs in advance for retail royalties for fifteen records, and although she was only given approximately 30,000 francs, she still made them do business on her terms.<sup>179</sup>

While living in Paris, Anna continually arranged performances in other areas of the continent and England. She and Hildegarde performed in Marseilles, Cannes and Belgium. Anna secured 14,400 francs for a week’s performance at a club in the latter country, paid in advance.<sup>180</sup> Of all of the travels, Hildegarde loved working in Belgium where she had great success in night clubs as well as on the radio.<sup>181</sup> With each of these venues, Hildegarde’s confidence as well as her reputation grew. One of the most important relationships Hildegarde and Anna developed was with the English people. Although this may seem ironic since they chose to live in Paris, their activities in London were the key to Hildegarde eventual success in the United States. All of the albums Hildegarde recorded in this time frame were recorded for Columbia Records in London. Her relationship with Pathé Pictorials has already been discussed. Somehow Anna was able to book Hildegarde for major events in London even though numerous popular British performers lived and worked in England.

Anna secured the opportunity for Hildegarde to open the Carlton Hotel cabaret in London, playing for the festivities of a royal wedding.<sup>182</sup> On November 29, 1934, Prince

George, duke of Kent, married the Greek Princess Marina. Numerous stars were there for the festivities. When Johnny Weissmuller arrived at the hotel, he brought Hildegarde flowers.<sup>183</sup> Although Hildegarde did not see the actual procession due to her late performing hour, she later claimed to have a view of it from her hotel window.<sup>184</sup> In fact, she was sleeping due to the late hours of show business. The royal wedding was cause for a great deal of festivities. This included numerous music performances at night-clubs and hotels across London. Hildegarde was booked to play the Carlton and was a success. And while Hildy was busy performing, Anna was busy making arrangements to have “Darling Je Vous Aime Beaucoup” copyrighted. This royal event in London was the first of three major British events over the next few years for which Hildegarde performed.

The next major British fete was the Jubilee celebration which commemorated the twenty-fifth anniversary of the assumption to the throne by King George V. For this royal occasion, Hildegarde performed at the Ritz. The Ritz was posh and had a notoriously difficult crowd. Anna referred to it as “the coldest room in the world.”<sup>185</sup> A lot of publicity surrounded this performance and each night the Ritz was packed with people. In fact, so many people were in the club on May 6, 1935, there was no room left for the piano. The festivities during the week thrilled even Hildegarde, and for several days, London teemed with throngs of people, filling the streets until all hours of the morning. Londoners decorated their entire town from top to bottom. The government lit major buildings at night and decorated each with flowers.<sup>186</sup> People adorned their homes with elaborate decorations showing their loyalty for King George. Hildegarde commented: “I have never seen the city [so] brilliant with decorations.”<sup>187</sup> Hildegarde was in awe of the elaborate celebration and overcome with the sheer number of people

out in the streets at all hours. In the midst of the festivities, Hildegarde and Anna were hard at work: Anna trying to sell “Darling” and arranging for recording sessions with Columbia whereas Hildegarde recorded “Darling” for Pathé and made recordings for Columbia. In addition, Hildy was also performing all night at the Ritz and towards the end of their stay, at the Carlton.

Anna worked continuously selling Hildegarde. At all times, she looked to return to the United States. Her zeal for business was palpable and no less intense when she began negotiations from Europe with NBC in New York. Throughout much of 1935, Anna and Hildegarde intended to move back to the United States. They corresponded frequently with NBC representatives over the course of 1935 and 1936, attempting to sell Hildy to NBC. Anna made it clear to NBC her intention was to essentially bring Hildegarde home to America. She felt it would be detrimental for Hildegarde to “become too continental.” In addition, Anna emphasized the “conditions throughout Europe.”<sup>188</sup> NBC agreed to air a show being broadcast on the BBC on September 20 1935, in hopes of hearing Hildegarde perform live, but this opportunity fell through because NBC would not broadcast “using records as part of the program.”<sup>189</sup> This left everyone involved disappointed including Hildegarde’s family who knew of the planned event and wanted to hear Hildegarde live on the radio.<sup>190</sup> Because nothing was confirmed for performances by the end of 1935, Hildegarde and Anna stayed in Europe which was a well thought out choice for them. Financially, without promise of bookings in New York, moving had the potential to ruin everything they established in Europe.

They forged ahead throughout the early part of the next year attempting to make arrangements with NBC. Anna wrote business letters and Hildegarde provided more

informal handwritten letters expressing her appreciation and excitement to work with NBC. The handwritten letters provide a nice personal touch to the business proceedings and countered well the harshness of some of Anna's letters. This too was part of Anna's strategy. While the handwritten letters came from Hildegard, they were actually dictated by Anna. No doubt this helped ease some of the tensions that NBC felt dealing with Anna in a managerial position. It was obvious Anna dealt with all business concerning Hildegard. Yet, in response, NBC addressed letters to Hildegard rather than Anna. At one point the company sent a letter to Anna in 1935, thanking her for writing but emphasizing "I have heard directly from Hildegard" as if Anna's information was unnecessary.<sup>191</sup> Initially, their NBC contacts tried to "help" Hildegard by arranging communication between Hildegard and an agent with whom Hildegard worked while still in vaudeville.<sup>192</sup> Clearly, the NBC people wanted to deal with a male agent rather than Anna and they tried to facilitate placing her back with a former agent. Correspondence from NBC to Hildegard conveyed to her that most artists forgot the help agents gave them and "are only too quick to jump to other representatives."<sup>193</sup> This was an obvious attempt to manipulate Hildegard and convince her to return to her "old" representation.

Anna was not impressed with NBC's attempt at usurping her place with Hildegard and she sent a letter in response to this in which she established her position regarding Hildegard's career in no uncertain terms. The letter begins with "Let us talk." She first made it clear that Hildegard was "extremely busy and unable to write" and continued, "as far as loyalty is concerned, I do Hildegard's business, and I have so far been guided by honor and loyalty." She then pointed out they appreciated the former

agent's work and the help from Gus Edwards. She reminded NBC that those relationships were dissolved and at the time when both had dealt with Hildegard, "she wasn't the artiste that she is now" and "at the moment she is one of the biggest things in England and on the continent."<sup>194</sup> There was no doubt, whether anyone at NBC liked it or not, they were dealing with Anna not Hildegard or any other managers and this was something to which they needed to adjust. No one offered any more suggestions regarding new agents. In one more show of power, Anna turned down an offer through NBC for four weeks at the Rainbow Room in New York City because she booked Hildegard to take over a Florence Desmond role in a stage play in London. She explained to NBC: "I waited for such an offer for so long ...I hope that for next Fall it can be renewed." The play in London with Hildegard playing opposite the well known British actor Leslie Henson was a hit and a great opportunity for Hildegard. Anna meanwhile used it as an opportunity to show her own control.

Anna worked tirelessly for Hildegard and she had no intention of allowing anyone else to have power in the performer's life. Her control over Hildegard was substantial and surpassed her position as manager or agent. At some point between their first meeting in 1930 and arriving in Europe in 1933, their relationship changed drastically. By the time they lived in Paris, Anna was no longer the annoying kid pestering Hildegard while she packed for a vaudeville tour. Their relationship had transformed into a tumultuous and scarring experience. Over the years, Hildegard engaged in relationships which were clearly unstable, involved anger, and a great deal of fighting. Anna was a continuation of this pattern. Confrontations were one of the constants in their relationship. Hildegard would get up in the morning or come home

from a show to find Anna's bags packed ready to leave her. They would fight, Hildegarde would beg her to stay, Anna would eventually unpack her bags, and agree to stay with Hildegarde. Hildegarde never seemed to see that Anna's success was Hildegarde, that without Hildegarde there was no Anna Sosenko. The fights were dreadful. They often involved other people also begging Anna to stay and could last for days at a time. Sometimes they fought over money, sometimes Hildegarde's performances, sometimes Hildegarde's drinking. This is not to say that every fight was due to Anna. Hildegarde shed light on her part in the fighting with one entry in her diary which said: "I wasn't in the mood to sing well," indicating there were times when Hildegarde intentionally provoked Anna.<sup>195</sup>

In spite of the fighting, their relationship was not continual chaos. Hildegarde appreciated the things Anna accomplished for her. She expressed great sympathy and gentleness for Anna when she became ill or needed glasses or made mistakes. Anna did the same for Hildegarde; she wanted her in good health and spirit. For Anna's birthday one year, Hildegarde had a gold ring Eddie Garr had given her and a diamond re-made into a diamond ring for Anna. The nature of their relationship was complex and difficult to define. Certainly others around them defined their relationship. Hildegarde became angry one night at Shéhérazade with a socialite because "he makes awful remarks about Sosenko and me."<sup>196</sup> This merits examination for a few reasons. It is obvious this acquaintance had done this on more than one occasion since "he makes" is her phrasing. But more importantly, she referred to Anna here as Sosenko, not Anna, as was her habit. It is impossible to know why she referred to Anna in that way here. What was certain

was Hildegarde's normal relationships with men, as established up until she left for Europe, ended with the arrival of Anna.

After Hildy was in Europe with Anna, there no longer appeared the notations such as "we chatted X's" or "we talked of things x" after interactions with men. This is not to say that she no longer saw men. She saw them socially at the clubs where she performed and in true Hildegarde fashion, she led them on and allowed them to heap gifts on her. Now they treated her and often Anna to copious amounts of champagne and dinners with no reciprocation from Hildegarde. She understood what the men wanted and expected, but candidly wrote in her diary: "I disappointed Count Salm last night but what I care? That proves a man shouldn't anticipate esp. not make it known."<sup>197</sup> Men gave her large sums of money as gifts. One man, Dimitri, gave her 5000 francs as a souvenir of himself.<sup>198</sup> He felt anything he bought her would not be enough so he gave her money instead. Another gave her 15,000 francs. All of these men pledged their undying love for her.<sup>199</sup> She took the money and shopped.

None of these men were love interests for Hildegarde and she made no pretensions about being involved with them. She was fully aware of their interests and her interests, and she manipulated the situations accordingly. Yet in her relationship with Anna, being in control was something she was unable to do. In ways, Hildegarde manipulated their relationship. Anna's threats of leaving, however, carried far more weight than Hildegarde's intentional provocation or her ruining a performance. Hildegarde did anything possible to preserve her relationship with Anna and this ultimately gave Anna control, so much control that she even dictated letters Hildegarde wrote home to her mother. While Hildegarde protested in her diary saying if her mother

was sick, “I shall give up everything,” the reality was Hildegarde did what Anna wanted.<sup>200</sup> This meant continuing in Europe after having an offer of a contract at the Rainbow Room.

Anna intended to come to the United States for a very short time to see how well audiences might receive the new and improved Hildegarde.<sup>201</sup> While Anna was brash with some, she knew better than to burn all bridges with NBC and continued courting them. Anna sent a more personable letter to John Royal about turning down the Rainbow Room engagement. John Royal was the NBC executive who truly worked on Hildegarde’s behalf and with whom Anna had a good rapport. She told him how thankful she was for his confidence in Hildegarde and his effort. Royal was helping with Hildegarde’s career. He finally got one of her broadcast performances from London relayed to the U.S.<sup>202</sup> Royal also tried to get Hildegarde on Fred Astaire’s radio program, saying “she is just the refined thing he needs.”<sup>203</sup> Hildegarde’s potential enticed many at NBC. Executives felt she had great potential due to her training in Europe, not to mention the fact she was so popular in Paris that she appeared on French television, the only foreigner to do so.<sup>204</sup> In spite of some of the difficulties with NBC, it was due to them that Hildegarde returned to the United States when she did.

Her appearance in January 1936 on French television occurred just before she began performing on the London stage in *Seeing Stars*. These would be her last major engagements before leaving for America.<sup>205</sup> Hildegarde was given the option to contract for two additional plays as well. Anna had the contract with Leslie Henson’s people specifically drawn up to give Hildegarde time to perform in America and then return to London and perform in both or one of his next plays if they desired.<sup>206</sup> This arrangement



set the date for Hildegard's return to the U.S. for late July 1936. Before she left Europe, she wrote what a "thank you" letter to the people of Britain which the *Sound Wave* published the July 1936 edition. In the letter, Hildegard explained she was leaving because she signed a contract with radio and that she hoped to return to Great Britain soon.<sup>207</sup> Some of the European newspaper and magazine articles appearing in the final months of their stay abroad carried news of her upcoming NBC contract and even her rejection of the gig at the Rainbow Room.<sup>208</sup>

### **The Continental Success Returns Home—For a While**

Hildegard and Anna left for New York on July 16, 1936. Hildegard returned as a star. According to newspapers, Hildegard "rocketed to fame in England and on the Continent," and was a "European radio star."<sup>209</sup> Hildegard's return to the U.S. drew the attention of newspapers across the nation. These articles, no doubt in thanks to Anna, linked Hildegard's fame and success with the aristocracy and socialites in Europe.<sup>210</sup> Her first engagement in the United States was on a radio show with the popular star Rudy Vallee. She guest-starred on a few more radio programs, had a quick visit home to Milwaukee, and then returned to New York for a performance at the Rainbow Room. As usual with these engagements, Anna pushed to make sure Hildegard had the best opportunities and best scripts. This meant paying for their scriptwriter every week out of their own savings in order that a person who knew Hildegard and her personality wrote for her productions.<sup>211</sup>

On November 6, 1936, Hildegard enjoyed the fruits of her labor and appeared on the first forty-minute television program offered by NBC. Broadcast from the top of

the Empire State Building and received at Rockefeller Center, the program was the first of its kind and must have been quite the coup for the “radio star.” Hildegard sat at the piano and sang and essentially re-created the essence of her night club performances. It was “New York’s first television performance of a complete program” and though no one estimated when the television would be suitable for home use, the program was a success.<sup>212</sup> For Hildegard, this meant a great deal of exposure across the nation as newspapers carried stories of NBC’s test.<sup>213</sup> It also left her known for many years to come as “The Television Girl.”

The “Television Girl” walked a fine line upon her return. Anna and Hildegard wanted to be “all American” and European at once. This meant that back in the United States Hildegard at once capitalized and at the same time denigrated her experiences in Paris. Using her European success as a way to appeal to the American public’s fascination with European class and style, Hildegard’s persona became firmly entrenched outside of the American norm, and like her friend Josephine Baker, she became part of the exotic. In July 1936, Hildegard and Anna made sure to distance themselves from that which made them, both of them, famous. Instead of “gay Paree” where Hildegard’s popularity lured customers to clubs, Hildegard’s less frequent London engagements became the focus of American news stories. With great emphasis placed on her performances at the Ritz and the Carlton Club, Hildegard besmirched the reputation of the places in Paris which in fact gave her the success and opportunities she enjoyed in London. Characterizing the Depression in Paris as virtually overwhelming with no tourists or crowds, Hildegard lauded London as having no repercussions from the Depression. In fact, she insisted in Paris it was necessary to get paid every night

because “The place may be closed the next day.”<sup>214</sup> Several newspapers carried versions of this story (partly true, partly fabricated) with a direct quote from Hildegarde saying: “You have no idea how terrible it is in Paris.”<sup>215</sup>

By August, their story evolved and Hildegarde subsequently embraced her continental training. They continued to tell of the difficulties when they first arrived in Paris, but that was now followed with the fact that soon after their initial disappointment Hildegarde found work in a club which started two years of success. Most importantly, during these years of success, Hildegarde “adopted the suave continental manner, which Europeans demand from their entertainers.”<sup>216</sup> This statement not only confirmed Hildegarde’s Europeaness, but also told readers that they too should embrace Hildegarde because she was an entertainer that met the standard for demanding worldly Europeans. In this article, Paris was no longer the devastating, depressing contrast to London’s bright shining star.

Much like her autobiography, both early versions of her life in Europe are important for analysis of Hildegarde’s career and the entertainment business. Both accounts contained different versions of the truth. These news articles set a tone for Hildegarde’s public presentation of this period of her life. They established the story that became her “rags to riches” story. Throughout Hildegarde’s career and until her death, her successes were attributed to one particular story. The legend was that because King Gustav of Sweden came to a club looking for Hildegarde in Paris, not knowing the owner had fired her, and then demanded to see her perform, the club owner was forced to quickly find Hildegarde. Needing her to come and play in order to please Gustav, the owner called Anna and begged her to send Hildegarde thus giving Anna and Hildegarde

the upper hand. After this, because the King of Sweden loved Hildegarde, the rest of Europe began to clamor to see her. Whether this actually happened or was simply a part of the story sold to the public remains to be seen. This event was not mentioned in any of the extant diaries from 1934 or 1935. It is a possibility that it occurred in 1933, but no hard evidence supports the story. As was often the case with Hildegarde's public representation of her life, as compared to the actual lived experiences, the reality is more powerful and showed the sheer determination of both Hildegarde and Anna in making Hildegarde a star. The public though, did not know the real story.

The conflicting accounts of Hildegarde's European jaunt, clashed with Hildegarde's lived experiences in Europe, but both versions had elements of the truth. The later account which started appearing in August of 1936 adhered more closely to the reality of Hildegarde's success in Paris and her life as it appeared in her diary for the years 1934 and 1935. Hildegarde was successful in several clubs in Paris and in London. Her characterization as a "continental" performer laid the foundation for her success in the United States. Most importantly, it clearly placed her outside of expectations and standards for American women, thus placing her in the position of essentially becoming the "other." Later on in her career, this gave Hildegarde more leeway with her identity, free from the constraints of the archetype of the "good girl" or "bad girl" to which other female celebrities were expected to conform. Also important was that the original story which quoted Hildegarde as she spoke disparagingly of her experiences in Paris also reflected the reality of her life as she wrote in the diaries. Hildegarde disliked the French immensely, especially the bureaucratic restraints placed on foreign performers. On more than one occasion Anna and Hildegarde took issue with the red tape involved in acquiring

a French work permit. Often referring to her interactions with officials by commenting, “those damn French,” Hildegard never hid her disdain for the requirements of work permits or the considerable difficulty in obtaining one.<sup>217</sup> The reality was that while in Paris, in addition to fighting with Anna, Hildegard was homesick, frequently wrote of being miserable, and not enchanted with the City of Lights. She missed her family and her homesickness was exacerbated with each letter from home. And this was compounded by her loss of close relatives such as her father and beloved Uncle Louis Jermain.<sup>218</sup>

Her misery belied the fact that her lifestyle in Paris exemplified the glamorous stereotype associated with the Paris nightlife in the 1930s. Anna and Hildegard rubbed elbows with a diverse and exotic mixture of socialites, royalty, and jazz performers like Josephine Baker and Garland Wilson. Their eclectic mix of friends and colleagues gathered in their hotels, met them for drinks, and bought them champagne and dinners. While Hildegard characterized her performances in American news articles as starting at 11:00 pm and continuing until seven or eight in the morning, she actually performed in a controlled manner, often singing only four or five songs per gig and while she was out until the early morning hours, that was not due to her work schedule. She became the toast of the cabarets in Paris.

Even though Hildegard was emotionally miserable while living in Europe, this did not prevent her from returning in April 1937 to London in order to perform for the coronation ceremonies for the new King of England. This event brought Hildegard nationwide attention as the news was featured in newspapers across the nation, continuing her reputation as popular among royalty.<sup>219</sup> As with her return to the United

States, her return to Europe was triumphant. “The Television Girl” returned to London and it was as if she had been gone for years rather than only a few months.<sup>220</sup> Upon her return, the “£200 a Week Song Girl” performed at the Ritz and on television.<sup>221</sup> As with the Jubilee celebration, London was decorated for the festivities and Hildegard again enjoyed herself in the environment. During this stay in Europe, Hildegard returned to Paris to perform, to the same hotel in which they had lived earlier. Her views of Paris softened as she proclaimed: “It seems marvelous to be back here again—How I love Paris.”<sup>222</sup> Eventually, they made their way back to London. All the while, numerous newspaper articles in America and Europe appeared about Hildegard, telling her story of success and her path to stardom.<sup>223</sup>

On September 23, 1937, when Hildegard returned to New York from Europe a second time, a group of photographers met her at the dock.<sup>224</sup> By October 26, 1937, Hildegard opened her show at the Ritz which paid \$500 for the first two weeks and \$600 for the second two weeks.<sup>225</sup> Her career was moving forward, thanks to Anna’s diligence and Hildegard’s abilities. Within a few months, a full page ad appeared in *Variety* for a new CBS radio show going coast to coast. The ad urged readers to tune it on Wednesday at 10:00pm for “99 Men and a Girl Starring Hildegard.” The advertisement also promoted her new engagement at the Savoy Plaza. There was little doubt Hildegard was officially a star. The continued success of the radio program and her act at the Savoy over the next year led to the Advertising Women of New York naming Hildegard “Glamour Girl of 1939.”<sup>226</sup> It also led to her cover of *Life*, which made it difficult for Americans to ignore her success or style.

## Conclusion

Without the benefit of Hildegard's words as they appear in her diaries, it would be easy to sell Hildegard, as do some of her obituaries, as an "overnight success." Even knowing her path to stardom does not do justice to the time spent criss-crossing the country on trains in the heat and cold to perform or her long hours of work in cabarets in Europe. The hours of practice, rehearsals, and perseverance are not evident from the newspaper or magazine articles. It is important to understand that her success was due only to her work ethic and Anna Sosenko's sheer determination to create a celebrity. Nothing that happened in her career, from her first vaudeville production to the *Life* cover happened by chance. Her personal account enriched the narrative of vaudeville and gives a special insight to the night-life in Europe in the 1930s.

The thirteen years between Hildegard joining "Jerry and Her Baby Grands" in 1926 to the *Life* magazine cover in 1939 is characterized by transformation, with Hildegard maturing into an adult, her family's changes, meeting Anna, and moving from the orchestra pit to center-stage. Transformation was not the only theme in this period. Irony epitomized much of this time in her life, especially regarding Hildegard's feelings and judgments. She seemed oblivious to the fact that she and Anna appear to be lesbians when she quit having romantic relationships with men after she took up with Anna. She abhorred public displays of vulgarity which was her view of the Folies Bergere. This contrasts with her approval of Josephine Baker who was notoriously photographed nude, including during her stint at the Folies Bergere in 1926-1927.<sup>227</sup> Hildegard was a devout Catholic, yet engaged in activities that can only be characterized as mortal sins in some cases. Yet her devotion was always there. The lies surrounding Hildegard's nationality

were also ironic, especially since only Milwaukeeans seemed privy to the farce that was the “German Lass.” Milwaukee newspapers carried articles detailing her capitalizing on a German dialect to be successful on stage, yet apparently no one else in the nation read the Milwaukee papers.

During this time, Hildegard established patterns which affected her entire life and career. The controlling, overbearing, and often abusive behavior which started with some of the vaudeville acts, in particular with Tony De Marco, was heightened with Anna. It is a mystery why Hildegard chose to remain with someone who threatened to abandon her in order to control her. Anna kept Hildegard on pins and needles and made Hildegard especially nervous when she attended her performances in Europe. Instead of dissipating over the years, their continuous fighting only grew to new heights after Hildegard became a star. Hildegard became obsessed with her weight during these years as well. This too changed Hildegard’s life as she worried about her weight well into her senior years.

What is certain, is that without the experience Hildegard gained through these years working the vaudeville circuit and European cabarets she might have never found fame. Anna Sosenko, the daughter of the owner of a rooming house, changed Hildegard’s path as well. Hildegard had talent, but Anna had a business sense that took the talent and turned it into a lucrative career. Anna had no qualms about pushing to get the terms she wanted in contracts and she had an innate sense about show-business. The control she exhibited in business, bled over into her personal life, and this changed her and Hildegard permanently.



<sup>1</sup> “HILDEGARDE: A Milwaukee girl with a catchy voice, an expressive face, a fine figure and plenty of glamour is a No. 1 bet for television” *Life*, April 17, 1939, 72-73.

<sup>2</sup> Diaries, April 14, 1939.

<sup>3</sup> Diaries, May 17, 1927; May 23, 1927; July 14, 1927. The inflation calculation comes from the Consumer Price Index, United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl>.

<sup>4</sup> For more information on the death of vaudeville, see Charles W. Stein, *American Vaudeville As Seen by Its Contemporaries* (New York City: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 335-378.

<sup>5</sup> Robert W. Snyder, *The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 3-4.

<sup>6</sup> Information about the Finkelstein and Ruben Circuit is available in entertainment trade magazines as well as in Dave Kenney, *Twin Cities Picture Show: A Century of Moviegoing* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2007) and Kathryn Fuller-Seeley, *Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Historical Case Studies of Local Moviegoing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Diaries, August 18, 1928.

<sup>8</sup> “Sells Public ‘Cool’ Idea” *Billboard*, May 24, 1930, 8; “Cold Houses Investigated: Board of Health Follows Up Complaints of Sharp Temperature Changes” *Billboard*, May 24, 1930, 21.

<sup>9</sup> While several books provide insight into the lifestyles of vaudeville performers, two in particular give numerous example of the commonality of the lifestyle because they contain first hand accounts from the vaudevillians. Those books are Charles Stein’s *American Vaudeville* and Joe Laurie, Jr., *Vaudeville: From the Honky-Tonks to the Palace* (New York City: Kennikat Press, 1972).

<sup>10</sup> Evidence of Hildegard’s lifestyle is evident throughout her diaries while she travelled with vaudeville shows. For specific examples, see: September 5 and 16, 1927; March 5, 10, and 15 1928; August 14, 1028.

<sup>11</sup> Examples can be found throughout Hildegard’s diaries, including, March 27, 1929; July 23, 1929; January 3 and 4, 1930; March 21, 1930.

<sup>12</sup> Diaries, March 10, 1929.

<sup>13</sup> Diaries, September 26, 1928.

<sup>14</sup> Hildegard kept a detailed list of “Books I’ve Read” at the end of her diaries starting in 1927. The list always falls at the after her last entry for the year and appears every year including in her last diary from 1991.

<sup>15</sup> Diaries, October 15, 1927; May 12, 1929.

<sup>16</sup> Diaries, February 10, 1929,

<sup>17</sup> Diaries, February 20, 1928; September 1, 1928

<sup>18</sup> Diaries, January 3, 1928; April 28, 1928; August 12, 1928; September 14, 1928.

<sup>19</sup> Diaries, August 29, 1927.

<sup>20</sup> Diaries, September 19-23, 1930.

<sup>21</sup> Hildegard recorded her salary in her Diaries, at the end of January 1927 and throughout January 1932.

<sup>22</sup> Diaries, April 24, 1929.

<sup>23</sup> Numerous articles throughout Scrapbook 4, Hildegard (Loretta Sell) Papers, Marquette University, Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Milwaukee, Wisconsin (hereafter cited as HLS Papers, MU) discuss John Vale’s voice and the audience reception. For example, “Unique Three Act Vaudeville Bill Now on View at Strand Theater” unnamed newspaper; “Lon Chaney in ‘Mr. Wu’ Keith Vaudeville, seen at Bijou Arcade” unnamed newspaper.

<sup>24</sup> The romance is evident through Hildegard’s diary entries during the time she travelled with Vale.

<sup>25</sup> Patterson Green, “Ideal Romeo Now Juliet,” unnamed newspaper, Scrapbook 5, HLS Papers, MU.

<sup>26</sup> John Dunning, *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 611.

<sup>27</sup> Laurie, Jr., 45; Frank Cullen, Florence Hackman, and Donald McNeilly, *Vaudeville, Old & New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America, Volume 1* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 305.

<sup>28</sup> Hildegard wrote throughout her 1930 diary about working for Irving Berlin's publishing house. The information is also in a caption on a photograph of Hildegard and Irving Berlin from the early 1940s. The news clipping is in the private collection of Rebecca Silver, Anna Sosenko's niece in Cherry Hill, New Jersey.

<sup>29</sup> Diaries, October 16 to the end of November, 1929. Charlie Bevis, *Mickey Cochrane: The Life of a Baseball Hall of Fame Catcher* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1998), 57; Laurie, 126.

<sup>30</sup> Diaries, March 19, 1929.

<sup>31</sup> Advertisement for Apex Club found through Alphabetical Listing of Chicago Jazz Clubs ca. 1915-30, Chicago Jazz Archives, <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/su/cja/jazzmaps/listalph.htm>.

<sup>32</sup> William Howland Kenney III, "Jimmie Noone: Chicago's Classic Jazz Clarinetist" *American Music* Vol. 4 No. 2 (Summer, 1986), 145. JSTOR, accessed May 13, 2010. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3051977>.

<sup>33</sup> Jimmie Noone's Apex Club Orchestra, The Red Hot Jazz Archive, <http://www.redhotjazz.com/apex.html>.

<sup>34</sup> William Howland Kenney, *Chicago Jazz: A Cultural History, 1904-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 40.

<sup>35</sup> Diaries, August 14, 1928.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Diaries, October 22, 1928.

<sup>38</sup> Kenney III, "Jimmie Noone: Chicago's Classic Jazz Clarinetist." For the recording date of *Sweet Lorraine*, <http://www.redhotjazz.com/apex.html>.

<sup>39</sup> William Barlow, "Black Music On Radio During the Jazz Age" in *African American Review* Vol. 29 No. 2 Special Issues on The Music (Summer 1995), 325. JSTOR, accessed May 13, 2010. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3042311>.

<sup>40</sup> The Red Hot Jazz Archive, "Jimmie Noone" <http://www.redhotjazz.com/noone.html> and Kenney, *Chicago Jazz*, 152.

<sup>41</sup> Patricia A. Martin, "The Solo Style of Jazz Clarinetist Johnny Dodds: 1923-1938" (PhD. dissertation, Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, May 2003). Accessed May 13, 2010. [http://etd.lsu.edu/docs/available/etd-0118103-203326/unrestricted/Martin\\_dis.pdf](http://etd.lsu.edu/docs/available/etd-0118103-203326/unrestricted/Martin_dis.pdf).

<sup>42</sup> Sunset Café and Black Metropolis- Bronzeville District, Chicago Landmarks, The City of Chicago's Official Site, <http://egov.cityofchicago.org/Landmarks/Index.html>; Timeline, Louis Armstrong House Museum [http://www.louisarmstronghouse.org/timeline/time\\_1920.htm](http://www.louisarmstronghouse.org/timeline/time_1920.htm).

<sup>43</sup> Diaries, May 23, 1929.

<sup>44</sup> Diaries, May 23, 1929.

<sup>45</sup> Diaries, September 6, 1929.

<sup>46</sup> Diaries, November 1, 1929.

<sup>47</sup> Luvenia A. George, "Duke Ellington the Man and His Music" *Music Educators Journal* Vol. 85, No. 6 (May 1999), 16. JSTOR, accessed May 13, 2010. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3399516>.

<sup>48</sup> Hildegard notes in her diaries that she dated a baseball player, September 6-10, 1927.

<sup>49</sup> Diaries, September 16, 1927.

<sup>50</sup> Diaries, December 5, 1928.

<sup>51</sup> There are numerous examples of their abusive behavior; some examples are found on: March 22, 1928; May 31, 1928; August 24, 1928; September 15, 1928.

<sup>52</sup> Diaries, March 26, 1928.

<sup>53</sup> Diaries, June 25, 1928.

<sup>54</sup> Diaries, January 28, 1929.

<sup>55</sup> Her relationship with Henry is detailed throughout her diaries in late December 1929 and early 1930.

<sup>56</sup> Diaries, January 24, 1928.

<sup>57</sup> Diaries, December 3, 1928.

<sup>58</sup> Diaries, April 23, 1927.

<sup>59</sup> Diaries, November 15, 1927.

<sup>60</sup> Diaries, November 23-24, 1927.

<sup>61</sup> Diaries, July 1928.

<sup>62</sup> Diaries, February 5, 1929.

<sup>63</sup> The “regrets” is noted numerous times throughout her vaudeville diaries. Examples are found on: January 18, 1928; February 6, 1928; February 17, 1928; May 22 and 24, 1928; May 5, 1929; August 1, 1929.

<sup>64</sup> Diaries August 1, 1929.

<sup>65</sup> Numerous examples with different priests are in Diaries; examples are found on: January 21, 1927; June 13 and 27, 1927; July 2, 1927; October 27 and 29, 1927; January 13, 1928; July 13, 1928.

<sup>66</sup> Diaries, November 29, 1927.

<sup>67</sup> Diaries, May 10, 1927.

<sup>68</sup> Diaries, March 11, 12, and 13, 1929.

<sup>69</sup> Diaries, March 13, 1929.

<sup>70</sup> Diaries, March 16, 1929.

<sup>71</sup> Diaries, August 30, 1929; September 4, 1929.

<sup>72</sup> Leslie A. Taylor, “‘I Made Up My Mind to Get It’: the American Trial of ‘The Well of Loneliness’ New York City, 1928-1929” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* (April 2001): 253. JSTOR, accessed April, 26, 2010. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3704816>.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 250. Technically, the publishers of the book were on trial for printing obscene material, but it was really the book that was on trial.

<sup>74</sup> Diaries, March 27, 1929.

<sup>75</sup> Diaries, March 23, 1930.

<sup>76</sup> This information comes from Hildegard’s diaries during this time period.

<sup>77</sup> These phrases are in two articles, “The Palace, New York” *Billboard*, (this article says the show was reviewed March 28) and “Palace Birthday Party Big Success” unnamed newspaper; both are found in Scrapbook 8, HLS Papers, MU.

<sup>78</sup> Anthony Slide, *The Vaudevillians: A Dictionary of Vaudeville Performers* (Arlington House: Westport, Connecticut. 1981), 44-45; “Gus Edwards: Biography,” Songwriters Hall of Fame Virtual Museum <http://www.songwritershalloffame.org/exhibits/bio/C229>.

<sup>79</sup> Slide, 45.

<sup>80</sup> “Gus Edwards Dies: Songwriter, 66” *New York Times* November 8, 1945; Slide, 44; “Gus Edwards: Biography” <http://www.songwritershalloffame.org/exhibits/bio/C229>.

<sup>81</sup> Slide, 45.

<sup>82</sup> Anthony Slide and the Songwriters Hall of Fame list the stars that Edwards “discovered.” An interesting example of Hildegard’s “lost” status is evident when comparing these two sources. Slide’s book, published in 1981, included Hildegard in the list of stars; the online source, obviously published more recently, neglects to mention Hildegard.

<sup>83</sup> Eddie Garr was a popular vaudeville performer but is now best known as the father of well-known actress Teri Garr.

<sup>84</sup> “Plays and Players,” *The Post-Standard*, Syracuse, New York August 19, 1931, Scrapbook 8, HLS Papers, MU.

<sup>85</sup> David Kessler, “Curtain Calls.” Next to the article is a handwritten note on the page that says this article came from the *Journal*, August 26, 1931, HLS Papers, MU.

<sup>86</sup> The “German Invader” was a headline over Hildegard’s picture in an unnamed newspaper from October 1931, Scrapbook 8, ibid.

<sup>87</sup> “Hildegard” Hildegard wrote in *Radio* on the scrapbook page, indicating the name of the publication and September 1 for the date, Scrapbook 8, ibid.

<sup>88</sup> All of these articles are found in Scrapbook 8, ibid.

<sup>89</sup> “‘Why Marry?’ ‘Why Not?’ Parry Two Bachelors as One Presents Handsome German Fraulein to Other” unnamed newspaper, marked January 1932, Scrapbook 8, ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Two advertisements for her radio guest appearance in Philadelphia are in Scrapbook 8, ibid.

<sup>91</sup> “Titan Club Names Singer as Hostess” *Baltimore Post* March 12, 1932.

<sup>92</sup> Karl K. Kitchen, “Karl K. Kitchen Presents: A Story with a Moral for Lecturers and Other Tales of the Big Town” *New York Sun* May 25, 1932, Scrapbook 8, HLS Papers, MU.

<sup>93</sup> Hildegard is mentioned several times in the section of *Billboard* called “The Palace” and an advertisement from *Billboard* can be found in Scrapbook 8, ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Diaries, May 24, 1932; June 6, 1932.

<sup>95</sup> Diaries, May 22, 1932.

<sup>96</sup> Diaries, May 24, 1932.

<sup>97</sup> *Life*, May 23, 1938, 4; Deena Ruth Rosenberg, *Fascinating Rhythm: The Collaboration of George and Ira Gershwin* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 120.

<sup>98</sup> Diaries, May 26, 1932.

<sup>99</sup> “W. R. Stewart Dies; A Philanthropist,” *New York Times*, September 5, 1929; “W. R. Stewart Left \$60,000 to Churches: Son Gets Third of Residue and Daughter Princess Anita de Braganza, Two-thirds,” *New York Times*, September 7, 1929.

<sup>100</sup> Diaries, July 5, 1932; August 25, 1932.

<sup>101</sup> Kitchen, “Karl K. Kitchen Presents.”

<sup>102</sup> George Davis, “People and Places, Plays and Parties, Past and Present” *Cleveland Press*, December 17, 1932, Scrapbook 8, HLS Papers, MU.

<sup>103</sup> The distinction between American and European women’s sexuality is evident with other stars of the era as well, such as Marlene Dietrich who was “full of European sex appeal” according to *Variety* magazine, March 12, 1930, as quoted by Gaylyn Studlar, “Marlene Dietrich and the Erotics of Code-Bound Hollywood” in *Dietrich Icon*, editors Gerd Gemunden and Mary R. Desjardins (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 211; another example of the reputation of European women is in an article from *Billboard* February 4, 1933, page seven, titled, “So This is Paris!” This is a “letter” allegedly received from an American performer in Paris who said it was necessary to protect the men in their act from the Parisian women who “nearly tear their arms off.”

<sup>104</sup> “Plays and Players,” *Post-Standard*, Syracuse, New York, August 19, 1931, Scrapbook 8, HLS Papers, MU.

<sup>105</sup> “Majestic Vaudeville Bill Sort of Entertainment That’ll Save the Stage” *Times Herald* Dallas Texas, Scrapbook 8, *ibid*.

<sup>106</sup> David Kesler, “Curtain Calls” *Journal*, Rochester, New York, August 26, 1931, Scrapbook 8, *ibid*.

<sup>107</sup> Heinrich Mann, “New UFA Talkie Praised in Berlin: ‘The Blue Angel’ Directed by Von Sternberg, Features Jannings and Marlene Dietrich” *New York Times*, April 2, 1930.

<sup>108</sup> Advertisement for Rivoli Theater, *New York Times*, November 14, 1930; “Some New Films,” *New York Times*, November 16, 1930.

<sup>109</sup> Joseph Horowitz, *Artists in Exile: How Refugees from Twentieth-Century War and Revolution Transformed the American Performing Arts* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 221-222.

<sup>110</sup> “In Studios and Theaters,” *New York Times*, November 9, 1930. Review for Morocco in *Billboard* November 22, 1930, 11.

<sup>111</sup> Advertisement for *Anna Christie* in *New York Times*, January 3, 1931.

<sup>112</sup> In Scrapbook 8, MU HLS, Hildegard wrote “Sailed on Bremen Sept. 30 for London.” This date however, is inaccurate. According to the “Shipping and Mail” section of the *New York Times*, the Bremen was due to arrive in New York on October 2, 1933, so it could not have departed from New York City on September 30. Also, Hildegard appeared at the Café Anglais in London on September 18, 1933, further indicating her notation was inaccurate. It seems obvious that they left at the end August rather than September and this is confirmed with the Bremen schedule as it appeared in the column “Shipping and Mail” in the *New York Times* from August 31, 1933.

<sup>113</sup> Peter A Huchthausen, *Shadow Voyage: The Extraordinary Wartime Escape of the Legendary S. S. Bremen* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2005), 6-8.

<sup>114</sup> Diaries, April 10, 11, 1930; June 29, 1930; December 26, 1930; July 10, 1932.

<sup>115</sup> Diaries, January 25, 1935; March 5, 1935; September 1, 1935; October 6, 1935.

<sup>116</sup> F.E. Halliday, *England: A Concise History* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1995), 211.

<sup>117</sup> D. J. Taylor, *Bright Young People: The Lost Generation of London’s Jazz Age* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007), 252-253.

<sup>118</sup> Gavin Weightman and Steve Humphries, *The Making of Modern London: 1914-1939* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1984), 157.

<sup>119</sup> According to Weightman and Humphries, two men, (Charles Madge and Tom Harrison) conducted a study in 1930 to compare the current conditions of the poor to Charles Booth’s study completed in 1889 and they found conditions in slums relatively unchanged after forty years.

<sup>120</sup> In *Bright Young People: The Lost Generation of London’s Jazz Age*, D. J. Taylor points out that the world of socialites and the world of the “Bright Young People” was often one in the same.

- <sup>121</sup> D.J. Taylor, *Bright Young People: The Lost Generation of London's Jazz Age* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007), 2-9.
- <sup>122</sup> Lisa Appignanesi, *The Cabaret*, revised and expanded edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 208-209.
- <sup>123</sup> Appignanesi, 209.
- <sup>124</sup> Appignanesi, *ibid.*; Stephen Bourne, *Elisabeth Welch: Soft Lights and Sweet Music* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2005), 36.
- <sup>125</sup> Advertisement for Café Anglais, Scrapbook 8, HLS Papers, MU.
- <sup>126</sup> "Hildegardé' Makes Debut at Café Anglais," *Modern Music Monthly*, November 1933, Scrapbook 8, *ibid.*
- <sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>128</sup> Appignanesi, 209; "History" Café de Paris <http://www.cafedeparis.com/club/history>.
- <sup>129</sup> Advertisement for Café de Paris gave details for the performance dates and times, Scrapbook 8, HLS Papers, MU; "Josephine Baker for London" *Billboard*, July 22, 1933, 4.
- <sup>130</sup> "London Bills" and "Calloway at Palladium" *Billboard*, July 29, 1933, 9.
- <sup>131</sup> Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 398.
- <sup>132</sup> "New Topliner Wakes up the Rhythm Fans," *The Melody Maker*, October 14, 1933, Scrapbook 8, HLS Papers, MU.
- <sup>133</sup> Ron Wellburn, "Jazz Magazines of the 1930s: An Overview of Their Provocative Journalism," *American Music*, (Autumn 1987): 256-257. JSTOR, accessed December 20, 2011. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3051735>.
- <sup>134</sup> Information about the trade presses of this era are discussed by Wellburn in "Jazz Magazines of the 1930s" and Mark Hustwitt in "'Caught in a Whirlpool of Aching Sound': The Production of Dance Music in Britain in the 1920s," *Popular Music*, Vol. 3 Producers and Markets (1983): 19. JSTOR, accessed December 20, 2011. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/853092>.
- <sup>135</sup> "Just—Hildegardé!," *The Sound Wave*, November 1933 and "Prominent Mid-month Releases," *The Gramophone Journal*, Scrapbook 8, HLS Papers, MU.
- <sup>136</sup> Columbia Records, December 1933 advertisement, Scrapbook 8, *ibid.*
- <sup>137</sup> "The Wise Old Owl Hears" unnamed magazine, Scrapbook 8, *ibid.*
- <sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*; Ed Sullivan, "Broadway Men and Maids," *Daily News*, November 13, 1933, Scrapbook 8, *ibid.*
- <sup>139</sup> "British Pathé tells the story of London on Film" BBC LONDON, July 12, 2010, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/local/london/hi/people\\_and\\_places/history/newsid\\_8811000/8811228.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/local/london/hi/people_and_places/history/newsid_8811000/8811228.stm); Pathé Pictorial, Series Histories-Detail, British Universities Film & Video Council [http://bufvc.ac.uk/newsonscreen/search/newsreel\\_histories/detail.php?id=12](http://bufvc.ac.uk/newsonscreen/search/newsreel_histories/detail.php?id=12).
- <sup>140</sup> The film is available for the modern reader to be viewed at [www.britishpathe.com](http://www.britishpathe.com).
- <sup>141</sup> British Pathé has all footage of Hildegardé accessible on the internet at [www.britishpathe.com](http://www.britishpathe.com).
- <sup>142</sup> Diaries, August 18, 1930.
- <sup>143</sup> Advertisement in newspaper for 1830 Club on November 11, 1933 and "The Social World," *Chicago Tribune*, Paris Edition, Scrapbook 8, HLS Papers, MU.
- <sup>144</sup> Advertisement for 1830 Club, Scrapbook 8, *ibid.*
- <sup>145</sup> Harry Levenstein, *We'll Always Have Paris: American Tourists in France since 1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2004), 15.
- <sup>146</sup> *Variety* reported the 1830 "folded" and that was how Hildegardé started at the Casanova Club. After their return to the United States, news reports carried stories of a club closing overnight and leaving Hildegardé and Anna in the lurch. Logically this was the 1830 to which these reports referred since the other venues in which she performed remained open after they moved from Paris. "Night Club Reviews: Casanova Paris" *Variety*, March 27, 1934, Scrapbook 8, HLS Papers, MU.
- <sup>147</sup> Eugen Weber, *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987), 16.
- <sup>148</sup> Roger Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War, 1914-1918* Second Edition, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 192; Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order 1940-1944* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972 and 2001), 12; Weber, 11-14.

<sup>149</sup> Richard Tomlinson, “The ‘Disappearance’ of France, 1896-1940: French Politics and the Birth Rate” *The Historical Journal* 28, no. 2 (June 1985), 405-415, Page 412; Paxton, 12.

<sup>150</sup> Gordon Wright, *France in Modern Times* Fourth Edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987), 357.

<sup>151</sup> Wright, 357; Weber, 7.

<sup>152</sup> Wright, 358.

<sup>153</sup> Wright, 357.

<sup>154</sup> Advertisement for the Casanova Club, Scrapbook 8, HLS Papers, MU.

<sup>155</sup> Matthew Jordan, *Le Jazz: Jazz and French Cultural Identity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 145.

<sup>156</sup> Michael Dregni, *Django: The Life and Music of a Gypsy Legend* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 62.

<sup>157</sup> Dregni, 62; Eugen Weber dedicated an entire chapter to the immigrant population in his study of France in the 1930s.

<sup>158</sup> Dregni discusses this and the previously mentioned *Variety* article, “Night-Club Reviews, Casanova, Paris,” giving details about who is taking customers hats and tending the ladies room.

<sup>159</sup> Paxton, 22; Weber, 95; Jordan, 147, 154.

<sup>160</sup> Hildegard, “Opera Singing at 18 Months! Hildegard’s Story: Village Grocery Store To Royal Command Performances, via Piano Act, Song Plugging, Musical Comedy and Television is the story of Hildegard.” This is an unnamed magazine, but the type face indicates it is either from *Melody Maker* or *The Gramophone Journal*. Volume 2, Hildegard Sell Collection, Billy Rose Theater Collection, New York Public Library, New York City, New York ( hereafter cited as HSC BRTC NYPL). The scrapbooks contained in the Hildegard Papers at Billy Rose Theater Collection are called “Volumes” instead of scrapbooks, and I will refer to them as they are named in that collection.

<sup>161</sup> Diaries, February 2, 1935; April 26, 1935.

<sup>162</sup> Information about the Ballet Russe and the ballet *Shéhérazade* is in Alexander Schouvaloff, *The Art of Ballets Russes: The Serge Lifar Collection of Theater Designs, Costumes, and Paintings at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford Connecticut* (New Haven: Yale University Press in Association with the Wadsworth Atheneum, 1997), 62-67.

<sup>163</sup> Diaries, February 7, 1935, HLS Papers, MU. While Michael Dregni in his historical biography of Django Reinhardt gives a brief description on page sixty-three of the interior of Le Shéhérazade, I relied heavily on an online photograph collection called, Parisenimages, which has a fine collection of a wide range of topics, including photos of Shéhérazade, with an effective search tool.

<http://www.parisenimages.fr/en> .

<sup>164</sup> Appignanesi, 123.

<sup>165</sup> Appignanesi, 123-125; Laurence Senelick, *Cabaret Performance Volume II: Sketches, Songs, Monologues, Memoirs* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 2.

<sup>166</sup> William A. Shack, *Harlem in Montmartre: A Paris Jazz Story Between the Great Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 49-51.

<sup>167</sup> This is a quote from Hildegard’s introduction to *Darling* as she presented in the film short for Pathé Pictorials.

<sup>168</sup> I transcribed these lyrics as they appeared in the original French published version of this song in 1935. The Pathé Pictorial short of the song confirms these lyrics. Later sheet music publications changed the lyrics slightly. A copy of the original publication is available in an unprocessed collection called the Anna Sosenko Collection at Randolph Macon College, Lynchburg, Virginia.

<sup>169</sup> Diaries, October 13, 1934; November 3, 5, 1934.

<sup>170</sup> Diaries, November 3, 1934.

<sup>171</sup> Shack, 50.

<sup>172</sup> The details of the exchanges between Anna, Hildegard, and the representative from UFA are found in Hildegard’s diary November 2 through November 12, 1934.

<sup>173</sup> Klaus Kreimeier, *The Ufa Story: A History of Germany’s Greatest Film Company 1918-1945* translated by Robert and Rita Kimber (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), 205-208.

<sup>174</sup> Kreimeier, 209-210.

<sup>175</sup> “Jewish Composer Ban by Nazis Flattens Radio” *Variety*, May, 9, 1933.

<sup>176</sup> “American Pubs’ Berlin Rep Gets No-Jew Order” *Variety*, May 16, 1933.



<sup>177</sup> Kreimeier, 245.

<sup>178</sup> Diaries, September 13, 1934. I have figured the exchange rate in 1934 and 1935 to average approximately 15 francs to \$1 American dollar. I came to this conclusion by looking specifically two exchanges that Anna and Hildegard made and which Hildegard noted in her diary. On February 19 1935, Anna exchanged 3040 francs for 200 American dollars. On March 28, 1935, Hildegard noted in her diary that she sent \$6.75 or 100 francs home. Obviously the exchange rate fluctuated so I will estimate on an approximate average rather than exact amounts.

<sup>179</sup> Diaries, September 6, 1935.

<sup>180</sup> Diaries, September 13, 1935.

<sup>181</sup> Hildegard's success in Brussels is evident in her diary from October 18, 1935 through November 4, 1935.

<sup>182</sup> Diaries, November 25, 1934; Robert Graves and Allan Hodge, *The Long Week End: A Social History Of Great Britain, 1918-1939* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963), 304; Hildegard, "My Fight for Success" *Radio Pictorial*, December 1936, Volume 2, HSC BRTC NYPL. It is important to note that according to *Radio Pictorial*, this article was written by Hildegard. In light of the fact that Anna dictated many of Hildegard's letters home, including to her mother, it seems reasonable to assume that Anna actually wrote this piece.

<sup>183</sup> Diaries November 25, 1934.

<sup>184</sup> Susan Collyer, "I've Had Tea with Hildegard—You Bet," unnamed newspaper, Volume 1, HSC BRTC NYPL.

<sup>185</sup> Anna Sosenko to Mr. Royal of NBC, February 7, 1936, Folder 64, Box 46, National Broadcasting Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin (hereafter cited as NBC WHS).

<sup>186</sup> Graves and Hodge, 305.

<sup>187</sup> Diaries, May 4, 1935.

<sup>188</sup> Anna Sosenko to Fred B. Bate, August 23, 1935, Folder 47, Box 37, NBC WHS.

<sup>189</sup> John F. Royal to Hildegard, September 25, 1935, Folder 47, Box 47, NBC WHS.

<sup>190</sup> This is evident from the letter to Hildegard from Royal and from Hildegard's diary from September 20, 1935.

<sup>191</sup> John F. Royal to Anna Sosenko, October 23, 1935, Folder 37, Box 47, NBC WHS.

<sup>192</sup> William McCaffrey to John Royal January 9, 1936 and John F. Royal to Hildegard, January 10, 1936, Folder 64, Box 46, NBC WHS.

<sup>193</sup> John F. Royal to Hildegard, January 10, 1936, Folder 64, Box 46, NBC WHS.

<sup>194</sup> Anna Sosenko to John Royal, February 7, 1936, Folder 64, Box 46, NBC WHS.

<sup>195</sup> Diaries, June 3, 1935.

<sup>196</sup> Diaries, November 21, 1935.

<sup>197</sup> Diaries, October 13, 1935.

<sup>198</sup> Diaries, September 17, 1935.

<sup>199</sup> Diaries, June 8, 1935.

<sup>200</sup> Diaries, April 14, 1935

<sup>201</sup> Anna Sosenko to John Royal, February 7, 1936, Folder 64, Box 46, NBC WHS.

<sup>202</sup> Hildegard to Mr. Royal, December 9, 1935, *ibid.*

<sup>203</sup> Telegram John Royal to Bate August 4, 1936, *ibid.*

<sup>204</sup> Anna Sosenko to John Royal, February 7, 1936, *ibid.*

<sup>205</sup> Anna Sosenko to John Royal, February 7, 1936, *ibid.*

<sup>206</sup> Anna Sosenko to Mr. Bate, February 24, 1936, *ibid.*

<sup>207</sup> Hildegard, "Hildegard's Appreciation" *Sound Wave*, July 1936, Volume 1, HSC BRTC NYPL.

<sup>208</sup> "An Honor that is Deserved" *Sound Wave*, March 1936, Volume 1, HSC BRTC NYPL; Rita Rae, Milwaukeean Hit on London Stage and Radio: Plans to Return Home for NBC Contract," unnamed newspaper, Volume 1, *ibid.*

<sup>209</sup> J. Walter Thompson, "Hildegard" in section "Radio Reports," *Variety*, August 5, 1936; unnamed newspaper, from Cleveland, Ohio July 25, 1936, Volume 1, *ibid.*

<sup>210</sup> Examples of this are evident throughout numerous newspaper articles in the Volume 1 scrapbook in the HSC BRTC NYPL. Specific articles are: Herb Caen, "Hildegard on Magic Key; Floyd

Gibbons in Madrid to Describe Spain Revolt” *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 23 1936; “Continental Success ---Hildegarde to Visit Hometown Mid-Month” *Wisconsin News*, August 11, 1936; “Hildegarde” *The New York Sun*, August 15, 1936; “Sang First Solo Here—Is Success in Europe” *Toledo Blade*, July 30, 1936.

<sup>211</sup> Anna Sosenko to Mr. Engeles, September 7, 1936; Anna Sosenko to Mr. Cowan September 7 1936; telegram Anna Sosenko to John Royal September 13, 1936, Folder 64 Box 46, NBC WHS.

<sup>212</sup> “Television Show Seen by 200 Here: New York’s First Complete Program is Reproduced on 7 by 12 Inch Screens” *New York Times*, November 7, 1936.

<sup>213</sup> “Television Leaves the Laboratory for Its First Major Test in the Field,” unnamed newspaper, Lincoln, Nebraska, November 22, 1936, Volume 3, HLS BRTC BYPL.

<sup>214</sup> Douglas Gilbert, “Hildegarde Recollects Gay Paree —with Shudders—as She Comes Back Home with Last Name Junked” *New York World Telegram*, July 29, 1936, Volume 1, HSC BRTC NYPL.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid. Several newspaper articles use virtually the same story. For example: “Gay Paree! It’s Tough Says Our Hildegarde” is an article presumably from the *Milwaukee Journal* since article begins with “From the Journal’s New York Bureau.” It referred to her as “Our Hildegarde” and gives her mother’s address as well the name of the high school from which she graduated. Article found in Scrapbook 1, HSC BRTC NYPL.

<sup>216</sup> “Continental Success Hildegarde to Visit Home Town in Mid-Month” *Wisconsin News*, August 11, 1936, Scrapbook 1, HSC BRTC NYPL.

<sup>217</sup> Diaries, February 8, 1935, February 11, 1935, July 31, 1935.

<sup>218</sup> Diaries, August, 9, 1935.

<sup>219</sup> Numerous articles appear in Volume 3, HLS BRTC NYPL. Some examples are: “Hildegarde, Stage and Radio Star, To Be Featured During Coronation” *Boston Traveler*, January 11, 1937; *Journal* Louisville, Kentucky; *News*, Greenville, South Carolina April 18, 1937; *Tribune*, Des Moines, Iowa, April 22, 1937.

<sup>220</sup> “The ‘Television Girl’ is here Again” *Sunday Dispatch*, London, Volume 2, HSC BRTC NYPL.

<sup>221</sup> “Hildegarde Returning,” *Sound Wave*, April 1937; “The ‘Television Girl’ is here Again” *Sunday Dispatch*, London, Volume 2, *ibid*.

<sup>222</sup> Diaries, June 22, 1937.

<sup>223</sup> These articles appear throughout Volume 2, HSC BRTC NYPL.

<sup>224</sup> Diaries, September 23, 1937.

<sup>225</sup> Diaries, October 13, 1937.

<sup>226</sup> “Glamour Girl of 1939” *New York World Telegram*, March 4, 1939, Volume 4, HSC BRTC NYPL.

<sup>227</sup> Bryan Hammond and Patrick O’Connor, *Josephine Baker* (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1988), 55.



### Chapter Three

#### **Hildegarde, A Luscious, Hazel-Eyed Milwaukee Blonde Who Sings The Way Garbo Looks**

What it takes to sell an automobile tire to a radio listener is anybody's guess but this season the 33,000 dealers in U.S. Royal de Luxes are stringing along with Hildegarde, a luscious, hazel-eyed Milwaukee blonde who sings the way Garbo looks.<sup>1</sup>

On May 12, 1945, *Billboard* readers, which included most people in the entertainment business as well as fans and audience members around the country, opened the magazine to find that Hildegarde was the most popular female singer in the United States. Just the year before, Hildegarde held seventh place overall, and in a surprise move for 1945, passed a field which included Frank Sinatra, Kate Smith, Dinah Shore, and Perry Como. For this year, though, Hildegarde was second only to Bing Crosby in popularity, quite a feat for the "continental chanteuse" from Milwaukee. This rating was an "eight-month index" which ranked of the most popular performers over an extended period of time, not just for the week previous. Hildegarde was "surprise of the season," especially in light of the competition.<sup>2</sup>

For Anna Sosenko, the devoted manager and Hildegarde, the devoted entertainer, this rating was something Anna could not manipulate or coax in order to place Hildegarde in second place. It does speak, though, to Anna's abilities in promoting what many considered her "creation" and also adds to the mystery of Hildegarde's largely forgotten legacy. The most popular female singer in the United States during World War II surely has a place in the annals of history especially in light of the way she earned that

position. For those who may have missed the article in the May 12 edition, Anna made sure to bring it to the world's attention the next week with a two page spread in *Billboard* on pages twelve and thirteen.<sup>3</sup> Hildegarde's name was in very large block letters spanning the length of both pages and written beneath it "America's No.1 Female Personality" on page twelve and a replica of the chart and accompanying article on page thirteen. A similar advertisement appeared on a two- page spread in the May 16 edition of *Variety*.<sup>4</sup>

It was quite a spectacle, and a pay-off for many years of hard work and devotion for the women. Hildegarde was regularly featured in *Billboard* and had appeared on the cover several times throughout the war era. Hildegarde's heyday lasted roughly from 1939 until the mid-1950s. During this time, Hildegarde set attendance records at night clubs across the nation and set a standard for night-club and supper-club performances which swayed the expectations of patrons and the quality of performances of entertainers in these venues. Through the war era, Hildegarde was on the radio hosting three of her own programs (*99 Men and A Girl*, *Beat the Band*, and *The Raleigh Room*). Her radio programs, in particular *The Raleigh Room*, gave the public across the nation a taste of her performances in posh supper-clubs, though most never had the opportunity to see her live. Hildegarde's salary was discussed frequently in the media and by the end of the war, the press touted her as the highest paid supper-club performer in the world.

During this time, Hildegarde became an important influence for American women and fashion as well as for other performers. She was named to the first "Best Dressed List" in 1939, and by 1944, the *New York Times* recognized her as "a potent fashion influence."<sup>5</sup> She appeared on the "Best Dressed List" eleven more times but her

influence extended past simply appearing on this list. Through newspaper articles circulated around the county, she disseminated tips on everything from how to wear hats to eye make-up.<sup>6</sup> Most importantly, her appearance in advertisements and as spokeswoman for numerous products brought her into the American home as a trusted representative for consumer goods. She advertised countless items from radios and panty hose to cereal and couturiers. Her most impressive feat occurred when Revlon named a nail polish and lipstick after her with “Hildegarde Rose.”

While Hildegarde’s image changed drastically over the course of her vaudeville days into her years in cabaret, ironically it changed little during the height of her career. For roughly fifteen years, Hildegarde’s image remained constant and her looks remained young and fresh. Staying youthful and maintaining this appearance was important for Hildegarde, especially in light of the fact that by the end of the war she was nearly forty-years old and truly past her prime in an era when the phrase “spinster” was used in earnest. Hildegarde was far older than the ideal woman in American culture. Born in 1906, she entered the most successful phase of her career in the mid-1940s, just as she neared forty-years old. Her style of clothing was classic and formal, and when not performing she wore the fashions of the day. As the fashions changed, her looks stayed nearly the same over nearly two decades. Her physique remained slim and athletic. Her hair changed slightly, but her face remained as fresh and pretty as during World War II. In fact, many of her extant photographs, if not dated, are difficult to date because of Hildegarde’s seemingly never changing appearance. Her age was a difficult topic for her, and when a reporter printed her actual age in 1943, she cried because of it.<sup>7</sup> The rigors of

being in front of the audience and cameras, made Hildegard obsessive about her weight and she exercised to maintain her physical appearance.

Life in America changed drastically from the beginning of the war until 1945. It is not farfetched to say that all Americans suffered shell shock from World War II. From the trauma of surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, the rationing at home, and a general sense of fear for the future to the wounded, dead, and missing soldiers the horrors of war were not lost on anyone. The war machine brought the United States out of its relative isolation and economic depression. Everyone served in the war, from soldiers on the war front to mothers, children, older Americans and the scores of others who became part of the war effort in factories and through other sacrifices. The need to feed the war effort meant rationing numerous goods important to American's everyday lives. Americans gladly used ration cards and did their best to support those serving in the armed forces. Women, especially middle class women, for the first time in American history went to work *en masse*, filling the vacant positions at factories and many ran farms, shops, and other essential enterprises. Poor women had always worked and during this war they were joined by their middle and sometimes upper class sisters, filling much needed positions. This war effort extended to celebrities, many of whom joined the services or performed for the troops, visited soldiers in hospitals, and sold war bonds. This had a direct impact on Hildegard as well as her career when she became highly successful in selling war bonds for the Treasury Department. This success led to another opportunity for Hildegard to have a new radio show designed specifically around her and her supper-club act. The *Raleigh Room* radio show debuted in one of the most coveted time slots because Red Skelton was drafted for the war effort. Skelton's time slot needed to be

filled, and Anna Sosenko and Hildegard were already in the process of pitching a new radio show to N.B.C. This provided Hildegard and Anna yet another chance to entrench Hildegard within the hearts of Americans.

Hildegard became the darling of the armed services. Many local and national government officials, from the most humble soldier to the highest ranking military men, became ardent fans. She performed frequently in Washington D.C. and the upper echelon of the armed services as well as senators, congressmen, and Harry Truman's family became devotees. Much of that was due to her knack for selling war bonds. During the war era, Hildegard did not write about political ideology, though Anna was a well known liberal. Her foray into politics consisted strictly of her interactions as a celebrity. Though she and Anna were dear friends with many people in government including Mr. and Mrs. Elliot Roosevelt (the son and daughter-in-law of FDR and Eleanor), these friendships for Hildegard were due to their presence on the social scene in New York. For Hildegard, life revolved only around her work and Anna. She expressed little if any political leanings in her personal diaries. Perhaps she did not have any. Perhaps Anna was correct in their old age when she told friends that Hildegard "slept through World War II." In any case, the war years entrenched Hildegard and, in many ways, Anna into American culture.

### **The Beginning: The Radio, The Fame, The Café Society**

Once Hildegard appeared on the cover of *Life* in 1939, her career blossomed. At the time of the publication, Hildegard was appearing at the Savoy Hotel and on the weekly radio program *Ninety-Nine Men and a Girl*. This pattern of performing primarily

in supper-clubs and night-clubs of higher class hotels and in her own radio programs set the tone for the pinnacle of her career. Anna Sosenko, Hildegard's devoted manager, publicist, and by some accounts *svengali*, made sure Hildegard wore the latest fashions and in the spotlight through fashion magazines, women's magazines, and in advertisements throughout the war years and beyond. Hildegard's clothing style, hair style, and idiosyncrasies became fashion trends for other women. Though her singing was important as were her supper-club performances, no single activity in her career was more important than the other. Instead her career—live performances, radio shows, advertising, and fashion influence—fed off of each other, at once being an event and at the same time a promotion for another activity.

Hildegard's success in American popular culture of that time occurred only because of the groundwork laid for her blossoming American career. In addition to appearing on the cover of *Life* and performing in her first radio program, she was listed in 1939 as "Glamour Girl of the Year." Anna put Hildegard in the forefront of American minds was by making sure she was on the first list of "Best Dressed Women in America" which also debuted in 1939. This was a list Hildegard made eleven more times in the coming years. All of this occurred at the same time Hildegard was performing in the Café Lounge at the Savoy Plaza Hotel. It was a place to see and be seen, and was filled nightly with local socialites, celebrities, and others who wished to rub elbows with the café society. Her performance at the Savoy Plaza embedded Hildegard within a particular group of people who had influence and money, the very things that ensured the hotel lounges and night-clubs remained in business. It was these same patrons who tuned into her radio programs.

By 1940, the nature of radio changed drastically from when it first emerged as an extension of department stores gadgets. In the beginning, radio's popularity began with department stores whose primary interest was selling radios. Stores began their own programming so customers had something to "tune into" on their newest household appliance. Eventually, major broadcasting networks such as National Broadcasting Company and Columbia Broadcasting System offered regularly scheduled programs for devout listeners who eagerly tuned in to hear their favorite radio personality, singer, host, drama, comedy, or quiz show. President Franklin D. Roosevelt used this new technology to enter the homes of Americans with his "Fireside Chats" to assuage the Depression era fears, attracting even more listeners to the radio-listening audience.

An important difference in the concept of radio in the early part of the twentieth-century as compared to the modern age is that radio programs did not play the newest records of artists. The concept of the disc jockey was something that did not enter radio programming until long after World War II. Artist's records were meant for purchase by the public and by owners of jukeboxes. Record labels had no interest in giving away for free over the radio what they expected the American public to purchase. Instead, recording artists appeared on radio programs which either featured them performing live as special guests or as hosts for their own shows. Even then, they tantalized the audience with samples of their newest recordings as well as performing standards of the day. Many radio shows essentially transferred the vaudeville stage tradition from one venue to another, the airwaves. This necessitated a new creativity to engage a listening audience who could not see the performers or the actors or their stage props. Radio offered excellent exposure for Hildegard and other performers like her because in addition to

providing a paycheck, it offered free advertising for wherever else they performed or for their newest recording.<sup>8</sup>

It is important for the modern reader in the age of television and the internet to be cautious about underestimating the significance of radio and its programming in the lives of Americans from the 1920s through the 1940s. The world came to people through their radios. Long before television became common in households in the early 1950s, it was the radio which influenced the taste and interests of everyday Americans from all walks of life and incomes. It was such an integral part of the household that most everyone gathered around to listen to the variety of options available on it. In fact, it was such a powerful influence that in 1938, the now famous broadcast of Orson Welles' presentation of the H.G. Wells classic *War of the Worlds* caused mass panic and hysteria to literally sweep the nation. That particular broadcast highlighted the ingenuity and creativity of those working in radio as Welles and his team sought to present their script as authentically as possible to their receptive audience.<sup>9</sup> Wells' audience was over one million, with a large portion believing an invasion to be true even as they crowded into streets and flooded into emergency rooms in shock. The reaction to this late 1930s broadcast showed how influential radio could be in the lives of listeners.<sup>10</sup>

By the early 1940s, the radio was a contested space. There were major networks that competed against each other and against small independent stations. Large companies like CBS and NBC had their own radio stations which primarily produced variety shows for the listening audience. Several companies produced records which very often had one song on each side. There were numerous record companies like RCA, Victor, Columbia, and Decca. They had artists under contract who recorded on their



labels. Hildegard was a Decca artist, along with luminaries such as Bing Crosby, Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, and Marlene Dietrich. Decca Records was originally based in England. Jack Kapp and his brother David Kapp owned and operated the American Decca label.<sup>11</sup> The Kapp brothers were good friends with Hildegard and Anna. All of them and their families often spent leisure time together sharing meals, going to clubs, having cocktail parties, and even enjoying Thanksgiving dinners.<sup>12</sup> The Kapps had specific ideas about the use of their recordings on radio and without doubt influenced Anna's thinking about artists and their "free" performances. In 1940, the Kapp brothers banned Decca recordings from being played on the radio.<sup>13</sup> For a modern American, this may seem surprising since radio is now and has been for several decades dominated by popular music. In the opinion of the Kapp brothers, allowing their records to be played on the radio inhibited their sales to regular consumers. It also negatively affected the sales to juke box companies which provided enormous business for record labels. Their reasoning was that if people heard a song on the radio they would not purchase the album or pay for it to play in a juke box. Some artists, such as the Andrews Sisters, protested this move and felt it shackled their performances across the country because regular Americans did not recognize them. Other artists like Bing Crosby, who owned considerable stock in Decca, and Guy Lombardo felt their record sales were hurt by radio play.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to Decca's battle with radio in 1940, the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP) was literally at war with the major radio networks. Because of copyright laws, radio stations had to pay royalties to copyright owners each time a song was performed publically. ASCAP was very powerful and

dictated to the networks how much they paid for licensing fees.<sup>15</sup> Most of 1940 news about radio and radio programming (appearing in trade papers like *Billboard* and *Variety*) was filled with the story of the networks refusing to give in to the latest increase in fees from ASCAP. ASCAP was furious about the slighting from the networks. Eventually, artists like Bing Crosby became involved. He threatened in August 1940 that he would go off the air if he was not allowed to sing ASCAP songs, a powerful threat from a major radio star.<sup>16</sup> Many did not believe that the major networks would ban all ASCAP music, leaving only traditional music and the music owned by newly formed Broadcasting Music, Inc. (which had a relatively weak catalog at the time) available for radio play. The networks followed through with their threat on the first day of 1941, banning all ASCAP music from their airwaves.<sup>17</sup> The boycott forced standard radio acts to change their theme songs. Many “standards” which were considered part of the public domain, like the music of Stephen Foster, became the broadcast norm for radio play.<sup>18</sup> By the end of 1941, all these disputes were settled: ASCAP lowered its rate request, the major networks were pleased with having manipulated ASCAP, and Broadcasting Music, Inc.(BMI) had developed into a major company representing country music and rhythm and blues.<sup>19</sup> With Hildegard tied so closely to the Kapp brothers, this made her live appearances on radio difficult since she was relegated to singing “Down By the Old Mill Stream,” “Shine On Harvest Moon,” and other standards.<sup>20</sup> For Hildegard and her colleagues, it affected the popularity of their recordings released during the contested time period.

This did not have an effect on Hildegard’s first show, *99 Men and a Girl*, which lasted only from February through August 1939 on CBS. It was on the air just long

enough for Hildegarde to establish herself as a legitimate professional to a more far ranging audience than available in a cabaret, night-club, or hotel lounge.<sup>21</sup> Again, this first show thrust Hildegarde into a new light, and coupled with her *Life* cover, helped Hildegarde cause quite a stir among music critics. The title of the show, according to *Time*, would have been *100 Men and a Girl* but Universal Pictures refused to allow the title of their 1937 movie of the same name to be used for a radio program, and so was born *99 Men and a Girl*.<sup>22</sup> It was also this show which gave Hildegarde one of the most quoted lines about her as *Time* proclaimed her to be “a luscious, hazel-eyed Milwaukee blonde who sings the way Garbo looks.”<sup>23</sup> Certainly that line encouraged Americans to tune in her show and “see” if this were true. This magazine article was free advertising for her radio program. The article, along with full page advertisements in *Variety* for the radio program and her Savoy engagements meant Hildegarde entered the 1940s with a great deal of success. This was most assuredly a more powerful position than just ten years previous when she was working the vaudeville circuit.<sup>24</sup>

If people wished to see Hildegarde “sing the way Garbo looks” in person, they needed to live near Manhattan and own a smart set of evening clothes and, of course, be able to afford dinner at one of the most exclusive hotel lounges in the city. The Café Lounge in the Savoy Plaza Hotel was Hildegarde and Anna’s first long term engagement in the hotel supper-club/cabaret scene. This type of venue was Hildegarde’s most prominent performance arena throughout much of her career. The hotel night clubs combined glamour, drinking, and eating, usually with a cover charge to the customers who were expected to purchase drinks.<sup>25</sup> These rooms were large, elegant, and opulent, evoking a particular glamour that rang true for patrons throughout the late 1930s to the

early 1950s. Even though the hotel version of a night-club was large, Hildegard made it feel intimate to those members of Café Society who clamored to see her. The “Café Society” is not to be confused with the night-club of the same name. The Café Society Club/Lounge opened in 1938 and was named for the subculture which was a group of people known as Café Society.<sup>26</sup> Café Society—the people—which existed from the 1920s onward consisted primarily of socialites, those with money, and those who wished to rub elbows with the sleek sophisticated crowd.<sup>27</sup> Writers and gossip columnists like Walter Winchell, Cholly Knickerbocker, and Dorothy Kilgallen perpetuated the lore of Café Society by writing syndicated columns intended for New York audiences but published across the nation.<sup>28</sup> Numerous syndicated columns such as “Café Society” by Malcolm Johnson of the *New York Sun* took tales of the nightlife of New York City out of the city and into the heartland. In time, no doubt, this assisted Hildegard in filling up the supper-clubs and night-clubs in swanky hotels across the country.

Hildegard’s first engagement at the Savoy Plaza Hotel began on September 9, 1938, and was the first of many performances in their club, the Café Lounge. Hildegard was an immediate success in this setting, and according to her personal accounts, people raved about her performances. She was “a big shot because she was a success” on her first night at the club which brought her a great deal of delight.<sup>29</sup> The Savoy was filled with the Café Society crowd, of which she was part in some ways. She attended formal cocktail parties during the evening and then the people at the cocktail parties often attended the club to see her perform. This did not mean Hildegard approved of all of the Café Society. Specifically, she did not appreciate the behavior of some in the crowd, one of whom she characterized as a “ritzy rude person” at one of her

performances.<sup>30</sup> The Café Lounge engagement was important for Hildegard's career for many reasons. It established her within a particular scene in Manhattan that consisted of important people in show business as well as a moneyed crowd with influence in town. Many of these people eventually became what was referred to as "the Hildegard cult," those who spent any amount of money to see her perform and be near her. As it turned out, Hildegard was such a draw at the Savoy Plaza that one evening just two weeks into her contract, the Café Lounge had to turn away 150 people from the door. This amount of business was something the Savoy never enjoyed before her performance.<sup>31</sup> Most importantly for Hildegard, her time at the Savoy established her as a consistent draw which made her enticing to other hotels who in turn wanted to lure more of the Café Society to their clubs and supper-clubs.

Each booking for entertainers at night clubs and supper clubs was constrained by time. Performers stayed at one location usually for four, six, or eight weeks. When Hildegard's performance at the Savoy came to an end, she moved on immediately to the next booking in Chicago at the Colony. Her performance in the Windy City caught the attention of Columbia Broadcasting Systems because not long into her contract in Chicago, they insisted she come to New York to audition for *99 Men and a Girl*. They were so interested in her that they paid the Colony \$500 for the Friday night performance she would miss and then paid for her to fly with United Airlines into New York City for the audition. CBS then flew her back to Chicago to resume her contract at the Colony. This is important because it speaks to her draw as an entertainer leading into the war era. All of this stemmed from her initial four week contract with the Savoy. The management at the Savoy had no intention of letting Hildegard get away from them and they arranged

quickly for her to return to the Café Lounge for a two-month stay beginning March 3, 1939 and then to return on July 27, 1939 for “an indefinite stay.”<sup>32</sup> It was not long before Hildegard became “closely identified” with the Savoy Hotel. Newspaper articles encouraged those who “heard her only over the radio” to come to the Café Lounge and see her in person.<sup>33</sup> Hildegard continued to perform at the Savoy throughout 1940 and 1941. She became their main attraction. Her initial success there, however, was only a small taste of her success that was to come.

Hildegard’s image from the time she returned from Europe was very stylized. Her signature look was in formal wear, often coupled with full length opera gloves. The clothes she wore were elegant, obviously tailored for her. They created a distinct look. When she performed in the supper-clubs, her always full length formal dresses impressed the audience as much as the music. Her formal clothing especially when accessorized with the full opera gloves brought “highbrow” culture into the atmosphere of the supper-clubs and occasional night-clubs. These clubs, though exclusive, would not be categorized in the same genre as attending the ballet or opera. Even though Hildegard’s live performances were filled with popular songs, some being her newest recordings and others being standards, she always performed classical music. She often sang in different languages, adding to the special exchange occurring in these venues between highbrow and lowbrow culture. Along with Hildegard’s beautiful clothes, her stage was also filled with a grand piano, a second pianist, and a full orchestra which contributed to establishing an unique performance that was very much different than the smaller venues which had much less room to accommodate such a set up. The cultured image that

Hildegarde and Anna cultivated doubtlessly contributed to her influence on women's fashion.

Hildegarde's influence on women's fashion is undeniable. In March 1940, she again made the list of the thirteen "Best Dressed" women in America. Pictured alongside such luminaries as Katherine Hepburn, Molly McGee (of Fibber McGee and Molly fame), and beauty product mogul Helena Rubenstein, Hildegarde embodied chic. Department stores wanted her to wear their clothes and appear in their stores. Much attention was directed towards Hildegarde's fashion sense and Anna made sure to keep Hildegarde in the spotlight. In late 1940, Hildegarde made it into newspapers by modeling a \$250,000 dress made of pearls.<sup>34</sup> The white formal dress, designed by the preeminent and influential designer Hattie Carnegie, was sent on a tour of the United States and would eventually be auctioned with the proceeds donated to charity.<sup>35</sup> Hattie Carnegie had numerous movie stars as clients, yet it was Hildegarde who modeled her pearl gown which took three years to make. In the spring 1941, Bonwitt Teller, an upscale store, had a life-sized wax "effigies" of Hildegarde wearing the latest spring fashions in their main window on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue in Manhattan. The window display featured a Steinway, a few "Hildegardes," one in a white "Grecian styled dress" and another figure seated at the piano in chartreuse. Three of her albums were prominently displayed. The *piece de resistance* was that Hildegarde's recordings played to all who passed on the sidewalk.<sup>36</sup> Hildegarde, and presumably Anna, felt this was their most important event since Hildegarde's *Life* cover. Hildegarde gave credit for the Bonwitt Teller window to Anna, calling it her "brainstorm." Yet no matter how persuasive Anna could be, in the end it was the management at Bonwitt Teller who ultimately decided to

use the idea, showing Hildegarde's level of popularity and her appeal to the wealthier patrons shopping for new spring fashions.

In light of this association with fashion, it is little wonder that eventually Hildegarde began giving women advice on fashion and fitness as well as make-up. At the end of March 1940, Hildegarde helped women answer the question headlined above her photograph "Should Hair Be Up or Down? She Says Both." Though a short article, the "exotic little blonde" provided a good hair role model for women from New York and Waterbury, Connecticut to Shawnee, Oklahoma and Benton Harbor, Michigan.<sup>37</sup> By mid-November 1940, "The Eyes Have It, So Do You" appeared as the headline for an article that featured advice from Hildegarde on eye make-up. This article also circulated through the Associated Press and appeared in numerous local newspapers in large and small cities across the nation including Milwaukee, Jersey City, and Watertown, South Dakota.<sup>38</sup> As Hildegarde's fame increased, so did her range of expertise. She began to advise women about their health and fitness, encouraging women to exercise, work on their natural charm, change their personality, or reminding them "don't stick your neck out" in order to maintain a firm and youthful neck.<sup>39</sup> Most of the advice articles were accompanied by photographs of Hildegarde in beautiful clothes or engaging in some sort of physical exercise or with her bicycle. It was through these types of articles that Hildegarde influenced American culture by influencing American women regarding their tastes and fashion. Because these articles were carried across the country and appeared in newspapers of large and small cities, Hildegarde's influence surpassed New York City and instead flowed into lives of even the most modest housewife in mid-America. Her hair, clothes, make-up, and ideas of physical fitness became guidelines for American



women. Her prowess was continually reinforced with events such as the Advertising Women's Club naming Hildegarde the "epitome of American entertainment" and honoring her at their annual ball.<sup>40</sup> Presented in articles as exotic, glamorous, and youthful, Hildegarde sold beauty tips to women who would eagerly attend Hildegarde special appearances in department stores in the cities where she would also perform.

### **The Chantoosy: The Music, The Signature Songs, The Competition**

In addition to her status as a fashion maven, Hildegarde became a veritable font of information regarding music. In 1940, the Associated Press circulated an article in which Hildegarde advised that American taste in music was changing. This article appeared nearly a year and a half after her national debut on *Life* magazine and provided the wider public with more information about Hildegarde's identity. Introducing her as "an international chanteuse" who was "known to every night club patron in town," the article left little doubt that Hildegarde had faith in the fact Americans were "becoming more choosy" about their music. This new "choosy" public was increasingly sophisticated because radio introduced regular people to high-culture entertainment such as the opera. The AP article was especially important for three reasons. First, it kept Hildegarde in the national spotlight, appearing in papers across the nation. Second, Hildegarde wrote (no doubt with Anna holding the pen) that the higher class music written by such luminaries as Jerome Kern, George Gershwin, and Cole Porter brought a certain sophistication to the listener. It was no coincidence that Hildegarde happened to perform numerous pieces by these composers. And lastly, Hildegarde expressed her confidence in Americans wanting their "everyday music" to be filled with performers who embodied artistry. The public

was no longer “satisfied simply with jazz.” This point was important for Hildegarde because she wanted to distance herself from the jazz of the cabarets where she had originally earned her popularity. Now she wanted to reinvent herself once again at the piano. She and Anna wanted to fully entrench themselves within the high culture of the hotel lounge instead of the arena of cabarets where it seemed socialites went slumming.<sup>41</sup>

Though not known at the time, there is little doubt that Hildegarde’s perspective in this article was actually Anna’s opinion. As was so often the case, Anna usually dictated and Hildegarde presented Anna’s ideas publically. One particularly interesting facet of the AP article was its assessment of high class music. Hildegarde/Anna argued against prevailing ideas of what constituted high class or highbrow music as compared to “everyday music” or popular music. Highbrow music constituted predominantly classical music by classical composers. This differentiation between what was considered classical and popular music was so rigidly enforced in this time period that some classical conductors routinely used fake identities if they performed on radio conducting a popular orchestra.<sup>42</sup> In light of these clear ideas about highbrow and vernacular music, the fact Hildegarde/Anna made a specific attempt to redefine high class to include what most music experts would catalog as popular music was particularly bold. They both understood the distinction between the two genres of music and were actively engaged in the music community. Hildegarde’s performance routinely incorporated classical music and both attended the opera, symphony, and ballet. Anna and Hildegarde had a clear understanding of their entertainment world and that of higher class entertainment-and that they were mutually exclusive. In the interview, Hildegarde carefully explained how the radio continued to expand their “opera and symphony

concerts” which allowed the public to become more educated about “solid” music and thereby raised the standards and expectations of the audience. Once educated, this audience would no longer find jazz or “shallow” popular music to be acceptable. The songwriters listed by Hildegard—Jerome Kern, George Gershwin, and Cole Porter—did not fit the criteria of highbrow. Yes, Gershwin produced some work which was more highbrow such as “Rhapsody in Blue” and the opera *Porgy and Bess*, but was just as well known along with his brother Ira for lyrics for songs like “Nice Work if You Can Get It” and “S Wonderful,” songs that could not be confused as classical or highbrow. Many of Cole Porter’s works like, “Let’s Do It (Let’s Fall In Love)” and “Don’t Fence Me In” would most likely have negated his high class standing among music critics and industry people of the era. And while Jerome Kern was an exceptional songwriter, his famous works like “Ol’ Man River,” “Night and Day,” and “The Last Time I Saw Paris” also excluded him from equal footing with classical opera. It is doubtful Hildegard and Anna changed anyone’s opinion but it was a bold move for them to step out of the world of providing entertainment to defining entertainment. Equating popular music and their genre of entertainment with operatic performances and the ballet was audacious, especially from a former vaudevillian and her manager with no musical training. Most importantly, it sheds light on their enlightened view of American music.<sup>43</sup>

Most ironic, this disparaging viewpoint of jazz directly contradicted the article on jazz which Anna published in 1933. In that article, she had argued that music should be accessible to all people, not just those of a class where they had the time and money to acquire a taste for it. In 1933 according to Anna, music should be readily available for the “man on the street,” not so highbrow or “technical and grandiose” that it was beyond

understanding of the regular person. In particular, Anna's earlier defense of jazz music contradicted the article published in 1940. In fact, only seven years before, Anna felt music should not be so exclusive that it required a special level of knowledge or instruction to have the ability to understand it. Jazz provided a welcome counterpoint to classical music. By the early 1940s, this attitude had changed radically. Part of this was undoubtedly because Anna wanted to lift Hildegard out of what she felt was the stigma of a "cabaret artiste" and move her into a different realm of performance. Anna privately criticized Hildegard and taunted her by asserting that when she saw other artists such as Helen Hayes or Ethel Waters, it made her feel Hildegard's career had peaked (it is unclear why Anna used those two particular artists to compare to Hildegard).<sup>44</sup> One clear way to avoid this cabaret connotation was to separate themselves from the stereotype of cabaret culture and jazz. Obviously Anna's youthful high minded ideas of music for "the man on the street" succumbed to her pragmatic understanding of the patrons who paid dearly for clothes, food, and alcohol to be able to attend Hildegard's performances at ritzy hotel supper-clubs.

Anna and Hildegard had enough experience in the music business to form their own conclusions about music by the early 1940s, at a time when Hildegard's sophisticated music and presentation became renowned. In the early 1940s, "Darling Je Vous Aime Beaucoup" (written by Anna) was already Hildegard's "theme song." This was significant. "Darling" was a hit in both Europe and the United States in the 1930s. By the war era, the song connected Hildegard to her audience not as a new up and coming singer, but as an established musician and performer. It also reminded the audience that Hildegard was a "Continental chanteuse" who was equally a

representation of American culture and European culture. Her exotic nature was ever present and though her mysteriousness was less important, it was still manifested in her personality and music. She was touted as singing and performing fluently in several languages including Russian. “Darling,” sung in a mixture of French and English, reinforced these ideas. “Darling” was far from Hildegarde’s only successful piece. It was Hildegarde who first popularized numerous songs later considered representative of war era popular music. This does not mean Hildegarde was the first to record some of the pieces. Throughout much of the twentieth-century, it was a common practice for artists and studios to overstep each other and record versions of music already being sold by other artists. For this reason, it was possible to have several versions of the same song simultaneously available for the music patron. For example, though “Darling” was Hildegarde’s song, Bing Crosby also recorded it in 1943. His version was panned as too slow and lacking “warmth and understanding.” One reviewer felt Americans were in no mood to hear this French song unless it was being performed by Hildegarde.<sup>45</sup>

Hildegarde, like Bing and other singers and orchestras of the era, recorded several pieces which were also recorded by other performers. It was Hildegarde’s versions of some pieces in the early 1940s which popularized these songs, though most modern Americans and students of popular culture would not recognize Hildegarde.

An example of a song with which Hildegarde found success and other artists did not was Jerome Kern’s “The Last Time I Saw Paris,” a song which for many Americans epitomized war time sorrow at the Nazi occupation of Europe. Kate Smith recorded a version in late 1940 that was being touted in January 1941 edition of *Billboard*. Smith was a formidable rival to Hildegarde and in some ways was strikingly similar to her.

Both women became radio stars, though Smith had been on the radio for many more years than Hildegard; both women were single; both were beloved by their fans; and both, by the early 1940s, had a theme song (Smith's was "When the Moon Came Over the Mountain"). The similarities stopped there. Kate Smith was southern, did not wear designer formal gowns, and was not known for performing in exclusive supper-clubs. She was more down to earth than Hildegard. Part of that was due to her being considerably overweight, especially for the era.

When Jerome Kern (music) and Oscar Hammerstein (lyrics) collaborated for "The Last Time I Saw Paris," America was horrified watching Nazis and Hitler marching across Europe. The song sentimentally recalls the last time a singer saw Paris, recalling a time before the fall of Paris in June 1940 and its subsequent occupation by Nazis. The song begins with "The last time I saw Paris/ her heart was warm and gay/ I heard the laughter of her heart in every street café" and ends with "No matter how they change her/ I'll remember her that way." As *Time* magazine saw it, many songwriters of this era became preoccupied with "patriotism" and "flag waving."<sup>46</sup> In the estimation of that particular *Time* reporter, of all the new patriotic songs, "The Last Time I Saw Paris" was the best.<sup>47</sup>

Smith recorded the song around the same time as Hildegard, but she used her power to guarantee she had "exclusive radio rights to it for six weeks."<sup>48</sup> So when her version was released and she began performing it on the radio in 1940, she was the only person performing in that venue. Because of this stipulation, other artists who recorded the song, including Hildegard, were prevented from performing the song on the radio. For several weeks, *Billboard* listed Kate Smith's record of the song on their list of

“Coming Up,” meaning songs that had the potential to top the charts. It seemed a timely piece, with Smith’s version being out only six months after Paris fell to the Nazis. In spite of the accessibility of Kate Smith for radio listeners, she was unable to take this sentimental song to the top of the charts. *Billboard* lamented the lack of interest of the public and felt that it should have received far more attention for Smith than it garnered.<sup>49</sup> Eventually, Smith’s version fell from the “Coming Up” list.

Hildegarde also recorded the song in 1940. Hildegarde and Anna forged a close relationship with the Kapp brothers who facilitated Hildegarde recording the “Paris” song. On October 10, 1940, the Kapp brothers called Hildegarde and Anna for a meeting to specifically request Hildegarde record the new Kern piece. The two women agreed and Hildegarde noted in her diary from that date: “Mr. Kern is delighted that I will do it.”<sup>50</sup> Kern’s involvement in requesting Hildegarde to record his newest song, is a testament to her popularity and reputation. On October 15, 1940, Hildegarde recorded the “Paris” song but she had a difficult time during the recording. She related this later in interviews and it became part of her lore. The recording session was particularly difficult as Hildegarde interpreted the song in a melancholy way, sadly recounting the last time she saw Paris. Someone whom Hildegarde could not see repeatedly asked her to change her presentation, playing the song more upbeat rather than downhearted. Hildegarde argued against the suggestion that she play the song in a peppy way because it was not a happy song. As it turned out, the request to make the song upbeat came from Jerome Kern, who, unbeknownst to Hildegarde, was sitting in a sound booth listening to her recording. This story was authentic and supported by Hildegarde in her diary entries. Jerome Kern also attended Hildegarde’s show after she recorded the piece. Kern’s

involvement in requesting Hildegard record his song, attending and directing the recording session of it, and then becoming an audience member at her performance that evening was a resounding endorsement of Hildegard's version of his music. Even though Kate Smith had more power at this time, she was not powerful enough to garner this kind of attention from Jerome Kern.

Unlike Kate Smith, Hildegard had no problems selling the song to the American public. Even though she could not perform the song on the radio, Hildegard was free to perform it in her act. Even though Smith's and Hildegard's versions became available for the public at the same time, the song became most associated with Hildegard. Even *Time* proclaimed that "silky voiced Hildegard's" version of the song "best captured its nostalgia for the boulevards."<sup>51</sup> In early 1941, Hildegard appeared on a radio program "ASCAP on Parade" with numerous other celebrities such as Al Jolson, Ethel Merman, Johnny Mercer, and Cole Porter.<sup>52</sup> For this program, Hildegard performed "Paris" because Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein "wanted me to."<sup>53</sup> Later that same year, Hildegard wrote in her diary: "how they yell for 'The Last Time I saw Paris.'"<sup>54</sup>

By August 12, 1942, Hildegard made headlines in Boston with the "Paris" song. "Hildegard, in Boston, Made Axis Hate Her for Her Rendition of 'Paris' Song" read the large feature piece in the "Amusements" section of the *Boston Daily Globe*.<sup>55</sup> Hildegard, who according to the article had "no competitors, only imitators," presented her song so powerfully that even "Hess and Goering hated her." Just a few months later, radio host Kay Ashton Stevens asserted in her radio program "Chats Across the Table" that Hildegard immortalized "The Last Time I Saw Paris" and the piece was "the most widely circulated record Decca ever printed."<sup>56</sup> The sales of the record were no doubt



bolstered by the story circulating that Nazis hated Hildegarde for her recording. Anna most likely generated the story in the first place to entice customers to come see Hildegarde live. This is not to say the people did not love Hildegarde's version of the song without Anna telling them to. On December 15, 1942, a negligee manufacturing company bought a \$10,000 war bond to in order hear Hildegarde sing the "Paris" song.<sup>57</sup> Even though Kate Smith sought to turn this into another patriotic hit for herself by cornering the market at least for a short while on the radio, the tactic did not work. Smith was fresh from establishing a second theme song for herself, "God Bless America," which she recorded in 1939 and which became the song most closely associated with her. Instead, it was Hildegarde who gained the recognition for the "Paris" song.

The story of Hildegarde's recording of "Lili Marlene" and "I'll Be Seeing You" follow much the same pattern. It was not that Hildegarde was the first or only artist to record these pieces, but her versions imprinted them in the hearts and minds of Americans of the era. Decca's David and Jack Kapp expressed their enthusiasm for Hildegarde's successes with both "Lili" and "I'll Be Seeing You." The latter sold 23,000 copies in the first two and a half weeks of sales. This song was originally written in 1938 and was not given too much attention by artists or producers.<sup>58</sup> Hildegarde first recorded the song in the late 1930s and it became a regular part of her show and was often requested. For instance, while playing at a private party in 1940, the guests begged Hildegarde to perform the song-twice.<sup>59</sup> In 1943, Hildegarde's version was re-released. By this time the American public was deeply entrenched in World War II and the sentiment struck a personal chord for American civilians and soldiers. "I'll Be Seeing You" was so popular it became yet another theme song for Hildegarde and she began

closing her performances with it. (One of the many things Liberace would later “borrow” from Hildegard’s stage show.) Soon after the re-release of Hildegard’s version, Bing Crosby and Billie Holliday recorded the song.<sup>60</sup> It is doubtless that many modern Americans associate Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra (who released the song in mid-1944) with “I’ll Be Seeing You,” yet it was Hildegard who first made the song a standard.

“Lili Marlene” played out similarly for Hildegard. Originally the song was a hit in Europe and sung by Marlene Deitrich who recorded it in German. This time like many other songs of the era, embodied a sentiment that touched the many who were deeply affected by the war. Hildegard recorded an English version in June 1944, as did many of her musical colleagues like Perry Como.<sup>61</sup> Even though her version did not chart, it sold well and management at Decca records were quite pleased with their sales of the record. On August 21, 1944, David Kapp wrote to Anna and Hildy to apprise them of the status of the record just two and half weeks into its release.<sup>62</sup> By that time, Decca had shipped 43,000 copies of Hildegard’s song, twice as many as they sold of “I’ll Be Seeing You” in the same amount of time. This is impressive considering that Americans were in a war during which many households had little expendable incomes and lived on rations. Kapp was optimistic that in the coming months they would have more sales due to the movie/documentary titled *The True Story of Lili Marlene*. Hildegard immediately found a receptive audience and the song became one her fans most favorite requests. The sales of the song were doubtlessly due to Anna’s diligence selling Hildegard and making sure that advertisements for “Lili Marlene” appeared frequently in the media.

The importance of Anna Sosenko in making Hildegard a vital part of American culture in the early 1940s cannot be overstated. She continually re-invented Hildegard

and kept her in the spotlight in newspapers, magazines, and on the radio. The decisions about which songs to record and how they were arranged usually came at Anna's request. Her creativity shone through in all of Hildegarde's recordings and the press attention which surrounded her music, stardom, and performances. A good example of this is the headline in Boston regarding "The Last Time I Saw Paris."

Another excellent case in point regarding Anna's diligence and innovative thinking was evidenced with an album Hildegarde recorded for Decca in 1941, *Lady in the Dark*. On January 23, 1941, Anna and Hildegarde attended the opening night of a new Broadway musical named *Lady in the Dark* starring Gertrude Lawrence. The production was a dramatic musical with a script by Moss Hart, and music and lyrics by Kurt Weil and Ira Gershwin respectively. When the play opened, the story of a woman undergoing psychoanalysis which mixed comedy and drama, was immediately well received. Anna and Hildegarde felt it was a fine production. Debate arose about whether it was a "musical play" or "musical comedy." Regardless, everyone felt it was a success especially with such talents as Hart, Weil and Gershwin involved.<sup>63</sup> People loved the premise and the cast which, in addition to Gertrude Lawrence, included Victor Mature and a newer cabaret artist named Danny Kaye. After attending opening night, Hildegarde later performed at the Savoy Plaza. Even though both of her evening shows went well that night, Hildegarde wrote in her diary: "great success –but felt so small compared to G. Lawrence."<sup>64</sup>

One week after the premier of the musical, Anna contacted David Kapp and proposed that Hildegarde record an album with some of the musical selections from the play. Their relationship with the Kapp brothers was based on mutual respect and

appreciation of the talents of everyone involved. Yet when Anna pitched her idea for the album, Hildegard wrote, David “fell for it” indicating David Kapp bought something Anna was selling.<sup>65</sup> Hildegard immediately began practicing the pieces with Harry Sosnick, her bandleader at the time and a well known mover and shaker in popular music of the mid-twentieth-century. In this way Hildegard and Decca produced the first album of the musical score of *Lady in the Dark*.<sup>66</sup> Lawrence was reportedly reticent to record an album because she had been ill. So when Hildegard, Anna, and Decca beat Lawrence and her production company to a released recording of her production, Lawrence became inspired as did those involved with the play to record the musical score. Her renditions of the songs were not as well received as Hildegard’s recording which was preferred by Gershwin.<sup>67</sup> Soon after, when a commemorative edition was to be released with the signatures of Lawrence, Hart, Weill, and Gershwin, Lawrence refused to autograph the 250 copies of the special edition because Hildegard recorded the score first.<sup>68</sup> Ironically, Hildegard felt small compared to Lawrence’s performance, yet Hildy’s singing and musicianship imparted the same feelings to Lawrence. This particular incident speaks volumes about Anna’s ability to foresee the coming trend and then push Hildegard to meet it. Anna’s vision for Hildegard was to cast her as a superstar, though she tried, to no avail, to also get her into movies. Anna kept pushing the Hildegard brand in new directions, something that would pay off for both the singer and Anna.

### **The Cult of Hildegard: The Persian Room, War Bonds, and the End of the War**

On September 23, 1942 with much fanfare, Hildegard debuted at the Persian Room in New York’s Plaza Hotel. By the time she opened in the Persian Room, society

columnists recognized her following as a “cult” notorious for “rabid and well-dressed” fans who would “stand on chairs in the back of the room in order to see her work her magic at the piano.”<sup>69</sup> She was the darling of supper-clubs and her fan base was not exclusively limited to Café Society. By 1942, her fan base included some of the most the well respected individuals in the music business. This is evidenced by Jerome Kern asking her to record his newest piece but is also bolstered by the accolades of people like Cole Porter. Porter sent Hildegarde a telegram in spring 1942, gushing about her performance. He told her “you were extraordinary and I don’t wonder that you pack every place you play.”<sup>70</sup> As one headline read and many believed: “Hildegarde—she Picks up Where ‘Oomph’ Leaves Off.” Indeed, her shows at the Savoy filled nearly nightly to capacity and this, along with her famous fans, excited the management at the Plaza who were financing an expensive renovation of their Persian Room.

By far the most important engagement of Hildegarde’s career occurred at the Persian Room. Located on the edge of Central Park in New York City, the Plaza was and remains one of the most prestigious addresses in Manhattan. With the lights of Broadway and Theater Row only steps away, the Plaza Hotel became renowned for luxury and sophistication, and Hildegarde became synonymous with its elegant supper-club. When the Plaza Hotel, as it stands today, opened in 1907, it was billed as “The World’s Most Luxurious Hotel.”<sup>71</sup> The current eighteen story structure, built on the site of the first Plaza Hotel dominated the early twentieth-century skyline. It immediately attracted “blue bloods” to set up permanent residence in the \$12.5 million dollar hotel.<sup>72</sup> The first guest, Alfred Vanderbilt, set the pace for the other wealthy families who moved into suites in the newest posh address in the city.<sup>73</sup> Although business suffered during the

Great Depression, the hotel remained an important spot at which to be seen in New York City.<sup>74</sup>

The Persian Room at the Plaza Hotel opened on April 2, 1934, only a short while after the death of Prohibition.<sup>75</sup> The new club cost \$50,000 and had a dance floor, a twenty-seven foot bar along one wall, and a special elevated stage for an orchestra in addition to seating nearly 300 people.<sup>76</sup> Café Society took quickly to the new venue that recreated a Persian atmosphere with Art Deco inspiration provided by Joseph Urban, the set designer and architect who designed for the Ziegfeld Follies. The Persian Room, awash in red from the floors to the drapes, provided a new venue for performers and patrons.<sup>77</sup> There was no doubt the ambiance was chic and formal, and in addition to cocktails, patrons could indulge in dinner which cost \$3 (or roughly \$37 today) which was no small sum. The grand opening of the Persian Room was a benefit for a local infirmary; numerous socialites reserved their places for the opening.<sup>78</sup> Ironically enough, the opening act on April 2, 1934 was none other than Hildegarde's old nemesis Tony DeMarco with his dance partner, Renee. They stayed until the fall.<sup>79</sup>

Hildegarde's big debut at the Persian Room was also with fanfare and greatly anticipated. The room was closed throughout the summer of 1942 for a renovation and its grand opening was scheduled with Hildegarde at the helm of a benefit party for the Navy League. Anna carefully placed advertisements in the major entertainment magazines and because of Hildegarde's reputation not only in New York but across the nation, a packed house was expected. It was reported that the room was redecorated especially for Hildegarde. Whether or not that was true, the new look of the Persian was very different from the previous red décor. Now egg-shell white was the prominent color

and the floor was terraced in order to give most everyone in the room a good view of the stage. Only one mural of the old version of the Persian Room remained on the walls.<sup>80</sup> The new ultra chic decorations provided a luxurious setting for 275 guests to sit, dance, drink, eat, watch, and participate in Hildegarde's performance.

Hildegarde's legend only grew as she performed at the Persian Room. She was booked repeatedly over the next sixty years at this venue and became synonymous with the Plaza hotel. Hildegarde and Anna moved into the hotel where they had a luxuriously decorated apartment from which they also conducted business. Anna began innovating with Hildegarde's act at this time, polishing it until it became the standard by which other performers were judged. The lineup for the shows always included a mixture of popular songs, sentimental favorites, war era pieces, and of course, classical music. Hildegarde was already notorious for entering her performance world through the kitchen, where workers would put down tablecloths on which she stood and kept her expensive gowns clean. She could wait and not be seen until she made her grand entrance as the orchestra played. Her banter with the audience ranged from humorous to serious, especially when remembering those in the war. And she had a knack for quieting even the most rambunctious drunk, most notoriously by repeatedly striking the high Bflat key on the piano, gaining their attention, and admonishing them "the show is on....and I am it." The audience inevitably became part of her show whether it was clinking their wine glasses during her "tinkling song" or when they were singled out to receive a rose from her. Anna kept a keen eye on the floor and knew all of the important people who were there. She would make note of the names, importance, and location in the room in order that Hildegarde could be sure to name them through the night during her performance.

Each night, Hildegard picked out some unsuspecting man, usually older, danced with him, kissed him and returned him to his wife or dinner partner.

Patrons packed the venues where Hildegard performed nightly. These performances were always accompanied with the intricate lighting which Anna cleverly innovated. Rather than having a single spotlight, Anna worked several different spotlights of various hues to accent the stage, Hildegard, and her gowns. Night after night, at the Persian Room and literally across the country, patrons paid a cover charge, purchased dinner, and bought drinks in order to be part of the Hildegard production. All service was suspended during her performance which lasted roughly an hour. She became notorious at the Plaza for the “standing room only” sign which was usually placed at the door. It seems impossible that using such a formula for a show, no matter how it is arranged and re-arranged, continued to draw patrons week after week, but it did. Although when the Persian Room re-opened in September 1942, one reporter suggested that the opulence of the audience was toned down due to wartime, the glamour was still there with Hildegard leading the way in her custom dresses from assorted designers and couturiers in New York. The skepticism of the reporter was evidence that even the highest of society succumbed to the rigors of the war on the home front, though Hildegard’s lifestyle did not reflect this idea as true. Her career dominated her personal life and daily schedule. Nearly every day was consumed with interviews, sitting for photographs, dress fittings, singing lessons, piano lessons, and rehearsals with her accompanist and orchestra. Being fitted for custom designer gowns on nearly a daily basis was decidedly not a part of the domestic war effort.



By November 4, 1942, after only a few weeks of performing at the Persian Room, Anna had a full page advertisement placed in *Variety* with a large bold quote “Hildegarde Is The Greatest ‘Showman’ of Our Time.”<sup>81</sup> The headline is in quotation marks, indicating Anna was quoting someone else, and at the bottom of the advertisement, Anna was listed as her Personal Management with Jack Bertell listed as her Personal Representative. The advertisement stressed that Hildegarde was now “booked straight through to 1944” meaning that Hildegarde’s career now had a guaranteed performance schedule. When her scheduled time was up at the Persian Room, Hildegarde would temporarily take her show on the road. Hotels, no matter how popular the performer, continued booking acts for limited engagements and while Hildegarde brought in much business for the Plaza, even her engagements had time restrictions. On her first break from the Persian Room, Anna booked her at the Empire Room in Chicago’s Palmer House Hotel. The Palmer House was Chicago’s version of the Plaza Hotel and its Empire Room was yet another opulent high class supper-club where the wealthy came to socialize.

Some doubted Hildegarde’s show had what was needed to fill such a large venue. It was speculated her charm relied on the smaller, intimate setting such as the Persian Room. Although 275 seats does not seem that small. Chicago’s Empire Room opened in the 1920s as a restaurant but in an effort to cash in on the post-Prohibition era, the owners decided to convert it to a night-club/supper-club in spring 1933.<sup>82</sup> Hildegarde opened at the Empire Room on January 7, 1943 to a sold out room.<sup>83</sup> A week later, Albert Fuller, the Advertising and Publicity Manager for the Palmer House, broke the news to Hildegarde that in her first week she broke all attendance and income records over the

last 10 years, including the standard set by Guy Lombardo whom she beat by \$3000.<sup>84</sup> By the end of her stay, he referred to her eleven weeks at the Palmer House as her “all-time record breaking engagement.” The Vice President and Managing Director of the Palmer House reiterated the fact that Hildegarde broke “every record” and expressed his thanks that so many thousands had the opportunity to attend her performances. He also regretted that the room “wasn’t large enough to hold everyone who wished to see and hear you.”<sup>85</sup> Even though there was skepticism that Hildegarde’s charm could work in a large venue, that venue proved still not large enough. Some patrons arrived to find standing room only at a Hildegarde’s performance. In her first three weeks there, she grossed over \$88,000, or roughly \$1,120,000 in modern terms.<sup>86</sup>

After she and Anna left Chicago, they returned for another stint at the Persian Room and then left for the Oval Room at the Copley Plaza in Boston with similar results as in Chicago. This was not the first time Hildegarde performed in Boston or at the Copley Plaza; she travelled there often and was well known. In fact just before she debuted at the Plaza, she performed at the Copley which sold out so quickly the management, in a front page advertisement, apologized for not being able to accommodate everyone who wanted to see Hildy during the previous week.<sup>87</sup> When she returned in the summer of 1943, it was no different. In fact her popularity was growing and upon her return she was in even higher demand. For this visit to Boston, she was heralded as “indubitably the best of all” when compared to “women entertainers in the world.”<sup>88</sup> Everywhere she travelled, her evening gowns were always discussed. The same applied in Boston, although one article insisted that “most of her 46 evening dresses are pre-war,” stressing to the regular folk that Hildegarde sacrificed for the war effort.

As she said: “you can’t be proud these days.”<sup>89</sup> While this was not true, it did not matter. She was firmly entrenched in the hearts and minds of the public. That same article proclaimed that because of her a popularity a new word, “Hildegardian,” was becoming part of the lexicon of Americans. After her engagement in the Oval Room ended on July 18, 1943 she quickly moved on to her next booking in Washington D.C. at the Statler Hotel.

Hildegarde was beloved in Washington D.C. and in 1943 the Statler Hotel actually spent \$5000 to remodel their Oak Room for Hildegarde’s show.<sup>90</sup> She opened September 8 and immediately found great success. Two nights later, a French admiral was in the audience and sang the “Marseilles” with her. It was in Washington that Hildegarde and Anna made valuable contacts. Hildy became the darling of the elites of Washington which included politicians, high ranking officers of the armed services and the Roosevelt and Truman families. Eventually she and Anna rubbed elbows with Joseph Kennedy (father of John F. Kennedy), ambassadors, and the powerful women of Washington. This was not her last appearance at this hotel, and as with other upscale hotels, she returned frequently playing to packed houses. In Washington, Hildegarde’s show was such a noteworthy ticket that even J. Edgar Hoover attended and had his photograph taken with her in 1944.

There is little doubt that the attention Hildegarde garnered in Washington was linked not only to her reputation and celebrity status but also to her effectiveness selling war bonds, a task which she took seriously. Selling war bonds was an essential way the American government solved the problem of funding the war effort as well as building American moral and support for the war.<sup>91</sup> For celebrities, selling war bonds was a way

to advertise themselves as well as become part of the homefront battle. All Americans were subject to the rationing which affected numerous consumer goods. These limitations included celebrities although they had more resources to work around some of the rules. For example, Hildegard paid her maid Virgie for her shoe rations. This enabled Hildegard to engage in one of her most beloved pastimes of shopping.

Hildegard and other celebrities may have had great loyalty to their beloved soldiers, but it was evident that those with money always had access to whatever things they wanted or desired. The “haves” wanted to put forth a good show for the public and to suggest that they were sacrificing like “regular” people. This is evidenced in an the article that stressed that those who showed up for Hildegard’s premier at the Persian Room were no longer wearing their expensive jewelry or furs. Another article expressed that most of Hildegard’s fabulous gowns were pre-war. No mention was made of how much those dressed-down patrons paid for a cover charge, dinner, or champagne as this would certainly have rankled the masses who purchased food with rations and who considered sugar a luxury item.

Celebrities assisted the war effort in a variety of ways. They performed for benefits and at the Stage Door Canteens where celebrities rubbed elbows with soldiers serving, performing and dancing with them.<sup>92</sup> Another important way celebrities helped the war effort—and the most prominent for Hildegard—was the bond drive. Bond drives were often organized by department stores. This was one of Hildegard’s specialties. An early appearance occurred in July 1942 at a St. Louis department store called Stix, Baer and Fuller. Hildy was in town performing at the Hotel Chase and received much attention and fanfare. Making the front page of the *St. Louis Globe*

*Democrat*, a large headline declared: “Hildegard—She Picks Up Where Oomph Leaves Off.”<sup>93</sup> The bond sale was advertised by Stix, Baer and Fuller in newspapers and in the department store’s publication, “The Flying Horse.” The event was billed as “American Heroes Day.” Advertisements encouraged people to come to the event, see Hildegard, and purchase war bonds to support American heroes. The most important point of the event was to reiterate that there were famous heroes of the war who made the news, but also that everyone’s loved ones who were at the war were heroes too. Hildegard appeared for two hours on the afternoon of July 17, 1942 and sold \$35,000 of bonds.<sup>94</sup>

This early event is important in understanding Hildegard’s popularity. Her ability to sell \$35,000 of war bond in two hours showed her popularity in mid-America, far away from the large East Coast cities where she played most frequently. It also removed her from the exclusivity of Café Society. Hildegard’s supporters at the Savoy, Plaza, Copley Plaza, and Statler Hotel were most certainly socialites and people who could afford to dine at exclusive venues, but they could not account for all of the war bond sales Hildegard achieved. The local wealthy people in St. Louis were more than eager to rub elbows with the epitome of high brow New York talent as is evidenced by several local socialites purchasing war bonds from Hildegard. One sent her maid to purchase the war bonds in her place.<sup>95</sup> It is also impressive that a Mr. Steinberg, president of the Alpen Brau Beer company, purchased \$6000 of war bonds from her. But these were not her only patrons that day.<sup>96</sup> Certainly her appearance in a local department store chain shows that the “common man” was as intrigued by Hildegard’s glamour as the socialites. The fact that she made appearances at department stores that

were not exclusive businesses like the more refined Saks in New York also illustrated her appeal to the middle-class who frequented these establishments.

A few weeks after this event, Hildegard performed in Boston and had two war bond events which further entrenched her in the hearts of rich and poor alike. In August 1942, a large sale was arranged at Filene's Department Store. Filene's was a landmark in the city and pioneered the concept of the "bargain basement" sales which alone shows they were not necessarily interested in attracting high society shoppers.<sup>97</sup> Numerous advertisements were placed in the local papers. A special platform was even built for Hildegard. Filene's was very active in the war bond effort, and according to the newspapers, the government was very pleased with the assistance it provided for the war effort.<sup>98</sup> Hildegard felt that this performance, elevated above 5000 people on a platform in the Stockings Department, was "the toughest assignment I've had yet."<sup>99</sup> In spite of competing with crowd noise and doing fifteen minutes of a radio program during the sale, she felt it was a great event. Four individuals purchased over \$1000 of war bonds each.<sup>100</sup> She was particularly grateful for the help of two sailors whom she pulled onto the platform with her to sing "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" and "Down By the Old Mill Stream." They encouraged the crowd to sing along and harmonize with her.<sup>101</sup> As one reporter confirmed, it was a difficult environment for a glamorous star who was performing without her normal frills of numerous colored lights or any accompaniment: "It takes plenty of personality to shine in a crowded store in the heat of midday, Hildegard has it to spare."<sup>102</sup>

This war bond sale was a success, and bolstered by it and Hildegard's appearance another drive was arranged for the Copley Plaza where she was booked for a

regular engagement. For this event, scheduled on September 10, 1942 in the ballroom of the Copley Plaza, the elites of Boston were specifically targeted. One of her most ardent supporters in this endeavor was former Ambassador to Great Britain, Joseph P. Kennedy, patriarch of the Kennedy family. The advertisements for this sale were very different from the Filene's event. Numerous papers carried the news that "six prominent Bostonians" were attending assisted by "a corps of debutantes" who acted as sales attendants for the war bonds.<sup>103</sup> The event attracted so much attention that the governor of Massachusetts appeared alongside Hildegarde in a photograph promoting the event. He assured the public that he would be in attendance.<sup>104</sup> Kennedy purchased a \$5000 bond and accompanied the Police Commissioner on stage to help her in her \$100,000 goal.<sup>105</sup> Whether or not she reached her goal is not certain, but it was a success nonetheless.

Soon after selling war bonds to both middle and high class society, Hildegarde was back in New York preparing for a large campaign at her beloved Saks. Saks Fifth Avenue was renowned for its elite shopping experience. It was one of Hildegarde favorite places to shop. In her older years, she quipped that when she died, her ashes should be scattered at Saks Fifth Avenue because that is where all her money went. It was at Saks in 1942 that a heavily advertised and promoted war bond sale was planned. From December 9-13, 1942, the *New York Times*, *New York Herald Tribune*, *New York Sun*, and *New York World-Telegram* all carried promotions for the event. The store held the war bond rally on the entire fifth floor where evening gowns were normally sold. It was advertised that a fifteen piece orchestra was accompanying Hildegarde.<sup>106</sup> The *New York Times* pointed out that the fifth floor was to be converted into a ballroom "with a

special stage, lighting effects, and microphones.” Although Hildegarde conducted similar shows in other cities, this “will be the first time that the idea is attempted on such a large scale.”<sup>107</sup> It was a big event, and while it was limited to 1000 guests, it promised to pay off greatly for the Treasury Department. On day of the event, Hildegarde arrived in a Red, White, and Blue taxi cab. The streets were cordoned off, and the head of all the Saks stores and Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia attended.<sup>108</sup> Hildegarde took her place on the specially built platform. Immediately she “had the audience in the palm of my hand.” In less than two hours, she set a record for the largest amount of war bonds raised in New York City with \$520,000 worth of bonds sold. The Southern Education Foundation purchased a \$50,000 bond and a negligee company bought a \$10,000 to persuade Hildegarde to perform “The Last Time I Saw Paris.”<sup>109</sup> The vice president of Saks, F. R. Johnson, was very pleased with Hildegarde’s performance and her ability to break the record in New York City. He sent her a telegram thanking her profusely saying “I repeat you are wonderful.”<sup>110</sup>

One of the most noteworthy events involving Hildegarde and her selling of war bonds occurred in Chicago on March 10, 1943. Just three months after her great success at Saks in New York City, Marshall Field’s department store organized a war bond event while Hildegarde was performing at the Palmer House. The admission to attend was the purchase of a war bond and the proceeds went to the U.S.S. Chicago fund. Similarly to other bond drives, Marshall Field’s assured potential patrons that Hildegarde would “sing, play the piano, and dance.”<sup>111</sup> Hildegarde appeared before a large, very generous crowd, this time in the fur department. It was at this bond rally that an event occurred which became part of the legend of Hildegarde. According to the lore which grew



around the event, after Hildegard sang The “Last Time I Saw Paris,” Philip Wrigley, owner of Wrigley Gum, purchased a \$1,000,000 war bond.<sup>112</sup> Hildegard confirmed this in her diary from that day. Wrigley, in fact, had given her a \$1,000,000 war bond. The entire day netted approximately \$3,000,000 in just a few hours.

This pattern of successful bond campaigns continued throughout the war. In July 1943, she hosted another sale at Filene’s in Boston and raised \$150,000 in bonds.<sup>113</sup> In Baltimore the next year on June 25, 1944, Hildegard participated in another bond sale which garnered over six million dollars for the Treasury Department. And so it continued.<sup>114</sup> With this type of work for the government, it is little wonder she became beloved by men and women of the armed services. In addition to working for the bond sales, she appeared countless times at events for soldiers and their families. During one event she handed out gifts to “poor” children, including the African American children of men serving overseas.<sup>115</sup> She also appeared frequently at hospitals to perform or visit with injured soldiers. One of the places she visited was Walter Reed Hospital where she entertained and took photos with the soldiers.<sup>116</sup> She was well known enough that upon a visit to Walter Reed in August 1944, General John “Black Jack” Pershing who was convalescing at the hospital requested a special visit from her in his room. She visited with him and sang songs about Paris to him, soothing the dying general in the same manner she comforted his young counterparts.<sup>117</sup> It would seem that soldiers sent her thousands of letters, requested she have dinner with their families, and attended her performances. Lieutenant Raymond G. Phillips from Iowa named his P-47 Thunderbolt fighter plane after her. “Who’s Daughter of All Regiments? Why, Hildegard of

Course” read title of an article which emphasized Hildegarde’s dedication to the war effort and spoke of the thousands of letters from soldiers.<sup>118</sup>

It was this popularity that led to Hildegarde’s opportunity to host the most popular radio show of her career. On June 15, 1944, Hildegarde debuted as the “femcee” of the revived radio program *Beat the Band*.<sup>119</sup> The show had been on hiatus for two years and returned with Hildegarde to fill the time slot of the Red Skelton Show during that summer.<sup>120</sup> Even after Skelton’s show returned in September, Hildegarde and her show moved to a different night and remained popular. The show was a quiz show and some thought Hildegarde’s personality was perfect for such a format because she thought quickly and had good comic timing. During the next year, Hildegarde took the show on the road. Wherever she travelled, her radio show went too and was broadcast from a local theater with a live audience. She was successful doing it. Her bandleader was Harry Sosnik. Hildegarde closed every show by saying “Give me a little traveling music Harry” which became her tagline for the show and something that a only a few years later Jackie Gleason would “borrow” for his variety television program *The Jackie Gleason Show*.<sup>121</sup> Most importantly, the show’s sponsor was Raleigh Cigarettes and the company respected Hildegarde enough that when Anna pitched a different radio show to them with a completely different format, they were eager to support it.

Anna developed the idea for a radio program that replicated as closely as possible the environment and ambiance of being part of Hildegarde’s audience during a live performance in a supper-club.<sup>122</sup> Since the government had drafted Red Skelton, his radio program had been suspended in his absence. Once Hildegarde renewed *Beat the Band*, it enjoyed a great deal of success. Raleigh Cigarettes saw the opportunity with

Anna's new concept to keep bringing in the throngs of adoring fans to listen Hildegard in a radio format during which she would play piano, sing, and interview other notable celebrities.<sup>123</sup>

In this way *The Raleigh Room* or *Hildegard's Raleigh Room* was born. The first broadcast of the brand new NBC show, designed and written for Hildegard, debuted on June 13, 1944. Anna made sure it had a good deal of advertising. A full page advertisement appeared in *Variety* June 28, 1944. Smaller advertisements with Hildegard's face and the time and date of the show, appeared across America in newspapers. Along the east coast, through Chicago and Memphis, and all the way to Los Angeles, the audience and potential record buyers knew exactly when Hildegard's show aired.<sup>124</sup> Hildegard earned rave reviews and her show, tailored to her performance style and regular supper-club format, was a success. Throughout the time she performed on live radio, her usual schedule of supper-club performances did not vary.<sup>125</sup> She continued to work tirelessly rehearsing, practicing, and taking singing lessons.

The intensive work paid off greatly as the *Raleigh Room* rose to the eighth most popular radio program by 1945. At the same time, Hildegard became known as the highest paid supper-club entertainer in the world.<sup>126</sup> Her salary made news throughout the war years and beyond. Characterized as "riding a skyrocket loaded with dollars," Hildegard could well afford to purchase the extravagant gowns for which she was so well known.<sup>127</sup> Anna and Hildy carefully planned every step of Hildegard's career to ensure she had ample opportunity to earn as much as she could. For instance, when Hildegard moved from the Savoy to the Persian Room, it was reportedly due to an increase in salary from her \$1,750 week at the Savoy. Also, she would get a percentage

of the take for the Persian Room during her performance.<sup>128</sup> As *Billboard* reported, since the Persian Room had more seating and a dinner and supper show, Hildegard benefitted greatly.<sup>129</sup> In early 1943, Hildegard earned at least \$2000 a week for her work in the supper-clubs as well as additional income for her other endeavors such as radio and advertisements.<sup>130</sup>

On November 1, 1943, *Life* ran an article about Hildegard entitled “‘Hildegard’ It Will Gross \$150,000 this year For the Firm of Sell and Sosenko.” George Frazier, the author of the article, had written about Hildegard’s salary in the preceding years. He claimed Hildegard’s salary jumped from \$25,000 in 1939 to \$150,000 in 1943. Whether or not his estimates were based on fact is unknown, but in light of Hildegard’s reputed salary at the Savoy Plaza that same year and her move to the Persian Room, it is probable that his estimate is correct. The article is important for several reasons. He wrote about Anna and Hildegard using the word “it.” Using phrase such as “It will gross” and referring the Anna and Hildegard as a “commercial institution” rather than people, there is no doubt that although occasionally complimentary Frazier’s writing is tinged with an acerbic tone. It served as foreshadowing for his 1947 book which had an entire chapter about Anna and Hildegard.<sup>131</sup> What hurt Hildegard the most about the article was that Frazier printed Hildegard’s real age at the beginning of the piece. When Hildegard found out *Life* intended to print her actual age, she cried for two hours.<sup>132</sup> Despite her success and a very high income (nearly two-million dollars in modern terms) she worried that her reputation would be compromised if *Life* revealed her true age.

In his article, Frazier presented Hildegard in some negative terms. Critiquing her interaction with her audience as “sometimes verging on bad taste,” he also repeated what

he claimed were criticisms from other detractors. For instance, he wrote that many insisted Hildegard wore “long gloves while at the piano merely because she cannot play enough to keep herself warm.” Although he went on to discuss her successes on *Beat the Band* and at the Persian Room, the criticism was deliberate. It was true that Hildegard had detractors, and in spite of her popularity, her voice did not enchant all who heard her. Some writers like Frazier would give positive reviews for her performances, yet talk about her mediocre vocal or musical talents. “Hildegard knows she has no voice, and she can’t possibly be serious about her piano playing, which she does largely with gloved hands” read one article that also spoke glowingly about her showmanship.<sup>133</sup> Other writers claimed Hildegard had little musical ability, saying things like she took “very little talent and turned it into one of the most amazing entertainment spectacles in show business.”<sup>134</sup>

None of this had any effect on her career. She was highly sought after, and during 1944 the Waldorf tried to steal her from the Persian Room. During that summer, the Persian Room closed which caused great speculation as to whether or not MCA, who at that time was in control of the talent at the room, would continue in their position. If not MCA, according to reports, then William Morris (one of MCA’s competitors) would be at the helm once the supper-club re-opened in the fall. Hildegard played a prominent role in this incident with MCA possibly losing its contract to exclusively control who performed at the Persian Room. The Persian Room closed only after Hildegard’s final performance there on July 15. According to *Billboard*, MCA and hotel management were no longer on good terms. This was due to MCA “breaking in,” so to speak, new acts so they could promote them for more money on the road. The issue was that

Hildegarde was affiliated with MCA not William Morris, and if the Persian Room's affiliation changed it meant Hildegarde would no longer appear at the Plaza. Hildegarde had become synonymous with the Persian Room and trade magazines reported on their relationship. *Billboard* alleged that Hildegarde made \$1700 a week for her engagement at the Plaza in 1943, but during 1944, her salary rose to between \$2000 and \$3000 a week plus a percentage of the take. To further complicate things, Lucius Boomer of the Waldorf was openly pursuing Hildegarde to leave the Persian Room and come to his hotel, an invitation not appreciated by the Plaza since Hildegarde was their top draw and money maker. Even though Hildegarde was scheduled at the Plaza in the fall, meaning the Waldorf's wooing could not come to fruition until 1945, this was no deterrent. The Persian Room and the Plaza Hotel did not want to lose Hildegarde, as she had become the artist most associated with this venue. Hildegarde's role in this incident alone shows her level of popularity and importance, especially in light of her salary and the fact she drew packed houses even during World War II curfews. The Hildegarde cult was all too ready to spend their money to see her, no matter the cost. This proved beneficial enough for the Plaza that they agreed on the modern equivalent of \$23, 773 to \$37,160 as a weekly salary.<sup>135</sup>

Hildegarde's celebrity status grew almost daily in the lives of Americans during the war. Her successes with live performances and her radio programs always tied Hildegarde to a brand whether it was the Plaza Hotel, Raleigh cigarettes, or the department stores where she sold war bonds. This also played out in the world of advertising. Originally she was labeled as a "chanteuse." Eventually, after the public embraced her true heritage as a Milwaukeean, she became "the chantoosy from

Milwaukee” and “The Dear That Made Milwaukee Famous,” an obvious play on the Schlitz Beer slogan, “The Beer that Made Milwaukee Famous.” These new humorous nicknames appeared in advertisements showing the comfort Hildegard felt with the “pet names” and the familiarity of the American public with them. For instance, a full page Cannon Hosiery advertisement featuring a full length photograph of Hildegard at a microphone proclaimed in large bold letters: “I’m Just a Continental Chanteuse From Milwaukee...but I can tell you about stockings!”<sup>136</sup> Just below the headline was Hildegard’s famous signature which was distinctive and recognizable. Obviously Hildegard and Cannon embraced the absurdity of being a “Continental chanteuse from Milwaukee,” but it was an effective advertisement which assumed the public at large was “in” on the joke.” One of Hildegard’s couturiers, Lange in New York City, used Hildegard to advertise the dresses created for her, presumably to lure in other wealthy women to purchase similar pieces.<sup>137</sup>

One of the most interesting spokeswoman assignments for Hildegard was her appearance advertising General Electric radios. She appeared in the advertisement while starring in the *Raleigh Room*, which received billing in the ad as well. The ad is brightly colored with Hildegard prominently displayed in full color wearing her full length opera gloves and running her hand through her signature upswept blonde curly hair. Another full color GE radio ad showed Hildegard standing at a microphone again with her signature opera gloves and proclaiming “You’ll Hear Hildegard in ‘Natural Color’—on a GE FM Radio!”<sup>138</sup> Eventually Hildegard became the “brand” that sold the merchandise. She advertised for Lux Soap, Rheingold Beer, Beck shoes, a hankie company, a glove company, and the list goes on.<sup>139</sup> The advertisements appeared in

various magazines across the country and reflect her popularity in American culture. Her influence sold her own shows and later sold products to a public that trusted and respected the Hildegarde brand.

### **Conclusion**

Anna and Hildegarde reached great heights during the war era. By end of war, Hildegarde had a signature look, personality, and signature shtick which played out in her nightly performances in supper-clubs across the nation. At some point in the early 1940s, Hildegarde began wearing and then playing piano in full length opera gloves. Speculation swirled as to why she wore the gloves but there is no doubt Anna had something to do with it. Hildegarde also developed a signature pose, with her arms overhead, a stance which would pick up the moniker “armpit pose” over the years. Most importantly, her familiar and signature stage props such as her full length opera gloves and her white lace hankies became fashionable for women. Though few women started taking their pictures in the “armpit pose,” they still wanted to dress like Hildegarde and to capture at least a small part of her glamour. There was no doubt those same women read with rapt attention the fashion, health, and personal advice Hildegarde dished out in papers across the nation.

Hildegarde’s influence on American culture is undeniable. The fact she served a spokeswoman for such varied products, showed the faith companies had in her popularity and influence. This authority is important because while Hildegarde was busy selling war bonds, singing on the radio, packing supper-clubs, and “hanging out” with dignitaries, socialites, and the military, she was living outside of the accepted archetype



for an American woman. After the war this became even more meaningful but it is important in this stage of her career because of the nature of her relationship with Anna. Anna's *svengali* standing was a reality. She controlled Hildegarde and made all major decisions regarding money, travel, music selection, parties, and friends. Most interestingly, they appeared to be a "couple" to the public. Anna was mentioned in most articles about Hildegarde and painted in masculine terms. For instance, when Hildegarde's *Raleigh Room* became a hit and rose on the popularity, a writer published a column commenting on the new radio ratings and said that if the show continued to gain in popularity they would "owe her manager Anna Soseyko [sic] a 25¢ cigar before 1945 is out."<sup>140</sup> Obviously this is a reflection of this author's assessment of Anna's sexuality since men smoked cigars. Articles constantly told of Anna following Hildegarde back to New York from Camden, talked about them being single, and eventually some articles began discussing the fact that the celebrity "Hildegarde" was a creation of Anna, a product she invented and then sold to the public. Yet this had no effect on Hildegarde's popularity. Without doubt, this is due in part to her "continental" label which stayed with her even after her true origins of Wisconsin became public. She was an American who maintained a European identity. Commentators and fans linked her to European royalty and reported on the various languages in which she performed. This Europeaness excused her from being held to the same standard as other American women. Her continued existence as exotic and worldly set her apart from the archetype of sexual norms for American women. Occasionally, an article would tell of an old marriage engagement and past loves, but these were few and far between. And the public seemed

to care little about Anna, her mysterious control over Hildegarde, or their relationship. They worked hard at the entertainment business and people respected that.

In some ways, Hildegarde and Anna happened into the successes they had during the war years. Yes, they both worked tirelessly throughout the 1930s to earn Hildegarde a career or at least an opportunity for a career in show business. Anna continuously tried to get Hildegarde connected with the movies, yet it seems Anna's controlling nature could not have withstood the full authority of the studio system which was necessary for success in Hollywood. The niche they found in supper-clubs came at a time when night-clubs in general were suffering due to operation costs during wartime. Those that were associated with hotels, however, had less overhead and therefore fared better in the war time economy. During this era, the federal government raised taxes on night-clubs which the entertainment business saw as an attack, as a way to force people to stay home and save money.<sup>141</sup> Nonetheless, the supper-clubs in hotels sought out intimate performers who matched their expensive décor and could effectively work their swanky customers. Some of these customers were what some referred to as the "nouveau riche" who, due to working for war production, had expendable income for the first time in their lives. They wanted to engage in high class leisure, and for the first time, be part of the "smart-set entertainment they have been reading about for years."<sup>142</sup> Hildegarde's years of honing her act in Europe meant she fit in quite well in the high class hotel lounges.

All of this work paid off for Hildegarde and Anna in terms of their careers as well as financially. Anna became notorious as one of the most successful managers in show business, an impressive accomplishment since she was most likely the lone woman manager in the field. Anna innovated, worked, bullied, complained, and convinced a

male dominated world of her ideas. By 1944, when Hildegard returned to Manhattan, it ensured a return to normalcy since she was the epitome of night life in the city.

“Manhattan Normal as Hildy Returns” read an article circulated through the Associated Press. In this era, if Hildegard was back at a piano replete with her gloves, glamour, and evening wear, it meant that the “Manhattan night scene again is normal.”<sup>143</sup> Apparently all of the work and hours dedicated to Hildegard’s career paid off well during the height of the war. Then as the war began to wind down in 1945, Anna began a new phase for Hildegard and her career. Hildy was no longer the ingénue hoping for a break. She was now a seasoned artiste with commanding performances who became in 1945, “America’s No. 1 Songstress.”

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<sup>1</sup> “Radio: Art and Tires,” *Time*, March 13, 1939.

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,760941,00.html>.

<sup>2</sup> “Crosby and Hildegard Lead Tab: Eighth-Month Index Surprise” *Billboard*, May 12, 1945, pp. 17, 25.

<sup>3</sup> Advertisement, “Hildegard: America’s No. 1 Female Personality” *Billboard*, May 19, 1945, pp. 12-13.

<sup>4</sup> Advertisement that is a copy of the original *Billboard* article. *Variety*, May 16, 1945, pp. 28-29.

<sup>5</sup> “Hildegard Gowns at Plaza Striking,” *New York Times*, May 3, 1944, Scrapbook 11, Hildegard (Loretta Sell) Papers, Marquette University, Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Milwaukee, Wisconsin (hereafter cited as HLS Papers, MU).

<sup>6</sup> “Among Thirteen Who Were Selected as the ‘Best-Dressed Women’ in America” *New York Herald Tribune*, March 24, 1940, Scrapbook 11, HLS Papers, MU.

<sup>7</sup> Diaries, October 18, 1943.

<sup>8</sup> There are numerous sources which provide extensive lists of radio programs. For example: Vincent Terrace, *Radio’s Golden Years: The Encyclopedia of Radio Programs 1930-1969* (New York City: A.S. Barnes & Company, Inc., 1981) and John Dunning, *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> Dunning, 452-454.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce Lenthall, *Radio’s America: The Great Depression and the Rise of Modern Mass Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 4-5.

<sup>11</sup> William Howland Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life: The Phonograph and Popular Memory, 1890-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 164.

<sup>12</sup> For example see, Diaries, November 26, 1942.

<sup>13</sup> “Protest Decca Air Ban: Talent Claims Broadcast Veto Means Loss of Rep and Income” *Billboard*, March 30, 1940, 5, 9.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

- <sup>15</sup> Debora Jean Halbert, *Resisting Intellectual Property* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 70.
- <sup>16</sup> “Vallee Confident of ASCAP-NAB Peace” *Billboard*, August 31, 1940, 15.
- <sup>17</sup> Halbert, 70.
- <sup>18</sup> William H. Young and Nancy K. Young, *Music of the World War II Era* (Westport, Greenwood Press, 2008), 92-93.
- <sup>19</sup> John Bush Jones, *The Songs That Fought the War: Popular Music and the Home Front, 1939-1945* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2006), 3.
- <sup>20</sup> Diaries, October 27, 1941.
- <sup>21</sup> Dunning 508.
- <sup>22</sup> “Radio: Art & Tires: *Time*, March 13, 1939.  
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,760941,00.html> .
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> *Variety*, February 22, 1939, 35, Volume 4, Billy Rose Theater Collection, New York Public Library, New York City, New York ( hereafter cited as HSC BRTC NYPL).
- <sup>25</sup> Burton W. Peretti, *Nighthclub City: Politics and Amusement in Manhattan* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 180-181.
- <sup>26</sup> David W. Stowe, “The Politics of Café Society,” *The Journal of American History* (March, 1998): 1384-1406, 1387. JSTOR, accessed September 7, 2010. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2568086>.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid; Peretti, 178.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid; Barney Josephson with Terry Trilling-Josephson, *Café Society: The Wrong Place for the Right People* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 238.
- <sup>29</sup> Diaries, September 9, 1938.
- <sup>30</sup> Diaries, September 13, 1938.
- <sup>31</sup> Diaries, September 24, 1938.
- <sup>32</sup> Full page advertisement for *99 Men and a Girl* in *Variety*, February 22, 1939.
- <sup>33</sup> Eckert Goodman, *Town and Country*, September 1939, Volume 5, HSC BRTC NYPL .
- <sup>34</sup> *Times-Star*, Bridgeport, Connecticut, November 4, 1940, Scrapbook 10, HLS Papers, MU.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>36</sup> Diaries, March 13, 1941.
- <sup>37</sup> “Should Hair Be Up or Down? She Says Both” appeared in several newspapers and is chronicled in Volume 6, HSC BRTC NYPL.
- <sup>38</sup> Scrapbook 10, HLS Papers, MU.
- <sup>39</sup> Scrapbook 10, HLS Papers, MU contains numerous example articles about exercise. For example: Ida Jean Kain, “Your Figure Madame,” *State Journal*, Springfield, Illinois February 15, 1941, and *Observer*, Hoboken, New Jersey, February 15, 1941. This same article was published under a different title, “Helpful Hints By Hildegarde: Personality Plus Not Impossible, Is View of Entertainer” *Milwaukee Sentinel*. February 15, 1941. Volume 8, HSC BRTC NYPL contains several different articles featuring Hildegarde’s advice for keeping a healthy neckline which were published from August through November 1942. Examples are: Betty Clarke, “Hold Your Head Straight and High” *Herald*, Gloversville and Johnstown, New York, August 7, 1942; Helen Follet, “Restoring the Neck’s Beauty” *Review*, Fostoria, New York, October 24, 1942; Sara Sutton, “Hildegarde Outlines Daily Exercise Program For Keeping Throat Line Smooth and Young” *New York Herald*, November 11, 1942.
- <sup>40</sup> “Epitome,” *New York World Telegram*, March 13, 1941.
- <sup>41</sup> Several examples of this article are available in the MU HLS collection in Scrapbook 10. The titles of the article vary from “Public More Choosy About Music Says Singer” to “Feel more Choosy About Your Music? Hildegarde, Who Sings, Says Our Tastes are Changing.”
- <sup>42</sup> Harvey G. Cohen, *Duke Ellington’s America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 76.
- <sup>43</sup> Several sources are available for exploration of the division of highbrow and popular culture in this time period. For examples see: Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009), Joseph Epstein, *Snobbery: The American Version* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), and David Savran, *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theater, Jazz, and the Making of the New Middle Class* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2009).
- <sup>44</sup> Diaries, January 11, 1941.
- <sup>45</sup> M.H. Orodener, “On the Records” *Billboard*, February 20, 1943, 22.

- <sup>46</sup> “Music: The Last Time I Saw Paris” *Time*, December 23, 1940, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,765092,00.html>
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>49</sup> See the “Record Buying: Coming Up” section of *Billboard* on January 11, 18, 25, 1941, and February 1, 8, 15, 22, 1941.
- <sup>50</sup> Diaries, October 10, 1940.
- <sup>51</sup> “Music: The Last Time I Saw Paris” *Time*, December 23, 1940, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,765092,00.html> .
- <sup>52</sup> Diaries February 1, 1941; “Berlin Songs on ASCAP Hour” *New York Times*, February 1, 1941.
- <sup>53</sup> Diaries February 1, 1941.
- <sup>54</sup> Diaries March 17, 1941.
- <sup>55</sup> Marjory Adams, “Hildegarde, in Boston, Made Axis Hate Her for Her Rendition of ‘Paris’ Song” *Boston Daily Globe*, August 12, 1942, Scrapbook 11, HLS Papers, MU.
- <sup>56</sup> Script, “Chats Across the Table” Hosted by Kay Ashton Stevens, January 17, 1943, Folder 4, Box 3, HSC BRTC NYPL.
- <sup>57</sup> “War Bond Jamboree Held: \$525,000 Worth Are Sold at A.W.V.S. Event at Saks 5<sup>th</sup> Ave.” *New York Times*, December 15, 1942.
- <sup>58</sup> Script, Adrienne Aimes, May 25, 1944, Folder 4, Box 3 HSC BRTC NYPL.
- <sup>59</sup> Diaries, May 29, 1940.
- <sup>60</sup> David Brackett, *Interpreting Popular Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 35-36.
- <sup>61</sup> Jones, 82-84.
- <sup>62</sup> David Kapp to Anna Sosenko, August 21, 1944 Box 1, Folder 2, BRTC NYPL.
- <sup>63</sup> Brooks Atkinson, “The Play In Review: Gertrude Lawrence Appears in Moss Hart ‘s Musical Drama, ‘Lady in the Dark,’ With A Score by Kurt Weil and Lyrics by Ira Gershwin” *New York Times*, January 24, 1941.
- <sup>64</sup> Diaries, January 23, 1941.
- <sup>65</sup> Diaries, January 30, 1941.
- <sup>66</sup> “In the Popular Field” *New York Times*, March 9, 1941.
- <sup>67</sup> This information about Lawrence’s impetus to record the music comes from Bruce D. McClug, *Lady In the Dark: Biography of a Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 106-108.
- <sup>68</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>69</sup> Malcolm Johnson, “Café Life In New York: More About Hildegarde and Her Magic at the Savoy-Plaza’s Café Lounge” *New York Sun*, undated article, Scrapbook 11, HSC Papers, MU.
- <sup>70</sup> Telegram, Cole Porter to Hildegarde, March 3, 1942, Volume 7, HSC BRTC NYPL.
- <sup>71</sup> Curtis Gathje, *At the Plaza: An Illustrated History of the World’s Most Famous Hotel* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 20.
- <sup>72</sup> “Another Fine Hotel Now on the City’s List” *New York Times*, September 29, 1907.
- <sup>73</sup> Ibid; Gathje, 23.
- <sup>74</sup> Gathje, 61.
- <sup>75</sup> Ibid, 62.
- <sup>76</sup> “Hotel Plaza Plans New Cocktail Room: Corner of 5<sup>th</sup> Av. and 58<sup>th</sup> St. Will be Fitted Up at a Cost of \$50,000” *New York Times*, January 31, 1934.
- <sup>77</sup> Ward Morehouse III, *Inside the Plaza: An Intimate Portrait of the Ultimate Hotel* (New York: Applause Books, 2001), 119.
- <sup>78</sup> “Tea Dance to Assist New York Infirmary: Many Reservations Made for Benefit at Opening of Plaza’s Persian Room Tomorrow” *New York Times*, April 1, 1934.
- <sup>79</sup> Morehouse, 119; advertisements for the DeMarcos appeared frequently in the weeks leading up to the Persian Room opening.
- <sup>80</sup> The information about the new look of the Persian Room appeared in several articles. Examples are: “Cholly Knickerbocker Says” *Journal American*, September 23, 1942; Malcolm Johnson, “Café Life in New York: Hildegarde Captivates Her Listeners in a New Setting at Hotel Plaza” *The New York Sun*, September 29, 1943, Volume 8, HSC BRTC NYPL . Many of the same articles are in Scrapbook 11, HLS Papers, MU.

- <sup>81</sup> *Variety*, November 4, 1942, 56.
- <sup>82</sup> Charles A. Sengstock, *That Toddlin' Town: Chicago's White Dance Bands and Orchestras, 1900-1950* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 98.
- <sup>83</sup> Advertisement, Palmer House, *Chicago Tribune*, January 5, 1943, p. 13.
- <sup>84</sup> Diaries, January 15, 1947.
- <sup>85</sup> Letter, Edward T. Lawless to Hildegard, March 19, 1943, Volume 9, HSC BRTC NYPL.
- <sup>86</sup> Advertisement for Hildegard at Empire Room, "Again! Hildegard February 3, 1943" *Variety*, Volume 9, *ibid*.
- <sup>87</sup> Advertisement, *Boston Globe*, August 17, 1942, Volume 7, *ibid*.
- <sup>88</sup> George W. Clarke, "Man About Boston" *Boston Daily Record*, July 10, 1943, Volume 11, *ibid*.
- <sup>89</sup> June McConnell, "Design for Youth: Hildegard's 46 Evening Dresses All Pre-War, But Who Looks at Them?" *The Boston Herald*, July 23, 1943, Volume 11, *ibid*.
- <sup>90</sup> George Frazier, "Hildegard Inc.: It will gross \$150,000 This Year" *Life*, November 1, 1943.
- <sup>91</sup> Numerous studies discuss war bonds as propaganda tools and as essential to the war effort both at home and abroad. See James J. Kimble, *Mobilizing The Home Front: War Bonds and Domestic Propaganda* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006) and Robert K. Merton, *Mass Persuasion: The Social Psychology of a War Bond Drive* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1946).
- <sup>92</sup> Ken Bloom, *Broadway: Its History, People, and Places: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 21; Emily Yellin, *Our Mother's War: American Women At Home and at the Front During World War II* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 82.
- <sup>93</sup> Virginia Tracy, "Hildegard—She Picks Up Where Oomph Leaves Off," *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, July 3, 1942. Article is available in Scrapbook 11, HLS Papers, MU and Volume 7, HSC BRTC NYPL.
- <sup>94</sup> Diaries, July 18, 1942.
- <sup>95</sup> Diaries July 17, 1942.
- <sup>96</sup> Diaries July 17, 1942.
- <sup>97</sup> Ronald D. Michman and Alan J. Greco, *Retailing Triumphs and Blunders: Victims of Competition in the New Age of Marketing Management* (Westport, Quorum Books, 1995), 8.
- <sup>98</sup> Unnamed newspaper article, August 21, 1942, Volume 7, HSC BRTC NYPL.
- <sup>99</sup> Diaries, August 21, 1942.
- <sup>100</sup> Diaries, August 21, 1942.
- <sup>101</sup> Diaries, August 21, 1942; "Hildegard Helps Boost Sale of War Bonds at Filene's" *The Boston Daily Globe*, August 22, 1942, Volume 7, HSC BRTC NYPL.
- <sup>102</sup> "Hildegard Helps Boost Sale of War Bonds at Filene's" *The Boston Daily Globe* August 22, 1942, Volume 7, *ibid*.
- <sup>103</sup> "Hildegard Seeks to Sell \$100,000 in Bonds" *Boston Post*, September 7, 1942 and "Mrs. Pratt Head War Bond Drive" *Boston Evening American*, September 9, 1942, Volume 7, *ibid*.
- <sup>104</sup> "Will You Have a Bond Governor?," *Boston Herald*, September 10, 1942, Volume 7, *ibid*.
- <sup>105</sup> Diaries, September 10, 1942; "At Copley-Plaza Bond Drive" *Boston Daily Globe*, September 11, 1942, Volume 7, *ibid*; "War Bond Drive" *Boston Herald*, September 11, 1942, Volume 7, *ibid*.
- <sup>106</sup> "Victory Show at Saks" *New York World-Telegram*, December 11, 1942, Volume 8, *ibid*.
- <sup>107</sup> "Will Push Bond Sale: Saks Fifth Avenue to Convert entire Floor Into Ballroom" *New York Times*, December 12, 1942.
- <sup>108</sup> Diaries, December 14, 1942; telegram, F.R. Johnson to Hildegard, Volume 8, HSC BRTC NYPL.
- <sup>109</sup> "War Bond Jamboree Held:\$525,000 Worth Are Sold at A.W.V.S. Event at Saks 5<sup>th</sup> Ave." *New York Times*, December 15, 1942.
- <sup>110</sup> Telegram, F. R. Johnson to Hildegard, Volume 8, HSC BRTC NYPL.
- <sup>111</sup> Advertisement, Volume 9, *ibid*.
- <sup>112</sup>Diaries, March 10, 1943; June McConnell, "Design For Youth: Hildegard's 46 Evening Dresses All Pre-War, but Who Looks At Them?" *Boston Herald*, July 23, 1943, Volume 11, *ibid*.
- <sup>113</sup> Diaries, July 29, 1943.
- <sup>114</sup> Diaries, June 25, 1944; "\$6,100,000 In Bonds Bought At Dinner" *New Post*, Baltimore, Maryland, June 26, 1944, Volume 12, HSC BRTC NYPL.

- <sup>115</sup> Diaries, May 28, 1943.
- <sup>116</sup> Pictures of Hildegard visiting injured soldiers are in all three repositories of Hildegard ephemera. For a specific example see: Volume 15, HSC BRTC NYPL.
- <sup>117</sup> Diaries, August 31, 1944.
- <sup>118</sup> Wauhilla La Hay, "Who's Daughter of All U.S. Regiments? Why Hildegard, of Course" unnamed magazine, Scrapbook 11, HLS Papers, MU.
- <sup>119</sup> Diaries, June 15, 1944; *John Dunning, On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old Time Radio* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 75; Dorothy Doran, "Around the Dial: Another Glamour Gal is 'Femcee,' Pretty Songstress To Preside Over Musical Show" *Beacon Journal*, Akron, Ohio, June 15, 1943, Volume 10, HSC BRTC NYPL.
- <sup>120</sup> "Radio Reviews" *Variety*, June 23, 1943, 46.
- <sup>121</sup> John Dunning, *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old Time Radio* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 75.
- <sup>122</sup> "Inside Stuff—Radio," *Variety*, June 7, 1944; "Beat the Band Gets New Emcee as Hildegard Replaces Red Skelton" *Times*, Shreveport, Louisiana, June 11, 1944, Volume 12, HSC BRTC NYPL.
- <sup>123</sup> "Radio Reviews: Hildegard" *Variety* June 24, 1944, pg 32.
- <sup>124</sup> Advertisements available in Volume 14, HSC BRTC NYPL.
- <sup>125</sup> For examples of her schedule while working both at supper-clubs and on the radio see: Diaries, June 22, 1943; July 13, 1943; July 18, 1944; August 8, 1944.
- <sup>126</sup> Paul McMahon, "Hildegard Out to Conquer a Larger Audience," *The Journal*, June 13, 1943, Scrapbook 11, HLS Papers, MU.
- <sup>127</sup> "Hildegard: No. 1 Femme Voice of the Air Waves" *Billboard*, June 16, 1945, 5.
- <sup>128</sup> "Fefe is Hopeful ; Hildegard \$1,750" *Billboard*, March 21, 1942, 12.
- <sup>129</sup> "Kelly Opens New club in N.Y." *Billboard*, July 4, 1942, 11.
- <sup>130</sup> "Intime Talent To Hotels: Lounges and Cafes Giving More Jobs to 'Intimate Entertainers'; Risqué Singers, Pianists Wanted" *Billboard*, February 27, 1943, 5.
- <sup>131</sup> This book will be discussed in a later chapter.
- <sup>132</sup> Diaries, October 18, 1943.
- <sup>133</sup> Sam Lesner, "Hildegard, Ran Wilde's Orchestra Score in Empire Room" *The Chicago Daily News*, January 15, 1944, Volume 13, HSC BRTC NYPL.
- <sup>134</sup> Larry Wolters, "Radio Flashes, Night Clubs" *Chicago Overseas Tribune*, February 3, 1945, Volume 17, HSC BRTC NYPL.
- <sup>135</sup> Most of this information comes from one article. "Morris O-O-S Persian Room: Plaza Hotel Sport Closes for summer—Agents Wonder if MCA Will Have it in the Fall," *Billboard*, July 15, 1944, 22.
- <sup>136</sup> One of these advertisements is in Scrapbook 12, HLS Papers, MU.
- <sup>137</sup> Examples of Lange advertisements are available in Scrapbook 11 and 12, *ibid.*
- <sup>138</sup> Advertisement, Volume 13, HSC BRTC NYPL.
- <sup>139</sup> Hildegard's advertisements appear throughout her Scrapbooks in all of her archival collections. For specific examples, see: advertisements for Beck Shoes, "Lily Langtry" dress designs by Lange, and Cannon Hosiery, Scrapbook 12, HLS Papers, MU.
- <sup>140</sup> Ratings pasted with no title or author in Scrapbook 11, HLS Papers, MU.
- <sup>141</sup> "Persian Room, N.Y." *Variety*, May 10, 1944.
- <sup>142</sup> "Intime Talent to Hotels: Lounges and Cafes Giving More Jobs to 'Intimate Entertainers'; Risqué Singers, Pianists Wanted" *Billboard*, February 27, 1943, 5.
- <sup>143</sup> The articles appear in Volume 12, HSC BRTC NYPL.

## Chapter Four

### Anna and The Queen of I Am aka The Most Impersonated Performer in Show Business

Her fame is understandable. She has a husky voice with a warm quality that makes you feel that she is singing for you alone, and that the rest of audience are outsiders.<sup>1</sup>

The cover of *Billboard* on June 16, 1945 was a dark celery green and carried the usual attempts at capturing the attention of readers with quick tantalizing headlines. As was *Billboard's* style, only one photograph was on the cover and in this edition it was Hildegarde. She had appeared on the cover of *Billboard* previously, in 1943 and in 1944. But this particular cover was markedly different from the others. Accompanying this photograph of Hildegarde was the pronouncement: "Hildegarde: Number 1 Femme Voice of the Airwaves." Out of all the competition from late 1944 and early 1945, Hildegarde attained the highest ranking among the fans. In spite of the fact that Hildegarde's following consisted largely of the Café Society crowd due to her preferred venues of supper-clubs in high class hotels, her appeal spread much further than just that group. The cover story referred to the May issue of *Billboard* from just a few weeks earlier. The May 12, 1945 *Billboard* had carried the results of an eight-month ratings of solo artists on the airwaves. These ratings, called the Hooperatings, ranked Hildegarde as the most popular female entertainer in the United States. In fact, only Bing Crosby was more popular than Hildegarde that year. Crosby and Hildegarde, number one and two respectively, rose to the top of the popularity chart among a diversified audience.<sup>2</sup> The



fact that Hildegarde was second only to Bing Crosby was quite a feat, especially in light of the fact that the others she surpassed on the chart were some of the same performers remembered as embodying the war era.

Frank Sinatra, Kate Smith, and Dinah Shore all lagged behind Hildegarde in popularity in May 1945 and this fact speaks to the irony of Hildegarde's height as a performer. In spite of people thinking otherwise, she was able to break through barriers even though she performed largely for the Café Society and the better dressed in major cities. By 1945, however, Hildegarde appealed to all levels of American society and this showed in official rankings. Her popularity within a wide ranging audience was further proved later during her heyday (early 1950s) appearances across the United States in department stores like Marshall Fields where women were encouraged to come meet Hildegarde and then purchase outfits like hers—but at affordable prices.

The May 1945 rating in *Billboard* was but one of the many successes Hildegarde had that year and all of these events started another new phase for her and Anna. From roughly this point until Hildegarde and Anna began dissolving their relationship in 1954, Hildegarde was one of the most popular and highly paid performers in her field. It was reputed that she and Anna earned so much money by the late 1940s that they had the luxury of turning down an offer of \$20,000 a week because they felt the club was questionable, leaning more towards gambling and not entertainment.<sup>3</sup> This too was ironic since both Anna and Hildegarde gambled. When she performed, Hildegarde asked for and received large sums of money, a portion of the earnings of the house take as well as countless “extras” like accommodations, discounts on food, and champagne to continue doing a job that began all those years previous in Milwaukee.

With the surrender of Germany in May 1945 and the Japanese surrender after the use of the atomic bomb a few months later in August, America and the world entered a new phase. This postwar world brought a decidedly different lifestyle for most Americans. The change was vast and reached into most areas of life from housing to entertainment. It was during this time that Americans fully embraced the trend of suburbanization, moving out of cities and into what some considered the monotony of look-alike houses and conformity. The United States experienced a post-war boom which kept Americans appreciative that the Great Depression had not returned after the war ended. G.I.s began attending college in large numbers while women left the workforce which they had originally joined to staff the wartime homefront. Americans also had new and powerful enemies with the Soviet Union, and by 1949, with China. This fear of foreign threats dominated American politics and life for the entirety of Hildegard's most popular years. Eventually the Red Scare and ensuing campaign of Senator Joseph McCarthy affected Hildegard and Anna through at least one of their friends whom Anna hired in spite of accusations that he was a communist.

For Hildegard, communism mattered but what most important for her was the changing nature of the entertainment world. Her style and genre in supper-clubs and high class hotels became *en vogue* during the postwar era. The nightlife in cities centered around fashionable high-class clubs, and in these clubs more than ever, the wealthy and celebrities met to eat, drink, and dance. She entered this time period with a highly successful radio program, *Hildegard's Raleigh Room*. She competed with other famous artists to get top billing among the numerous variety shows available for listeners. But that field of entertainment was also changing. This was clear even in the May 12, 1945

*Billboard* which proclaimed Hildegarde as the top female soloist. The world of entertainment was taking a new turn. The American Broadcasting Company had a large, two-page spread announcing their new plans for television programming. This advertisement/article assured the readers that ABC intended to provide continuity for their patrons. ABC would offer what they knew worked, radio programs for television. Yes, they told their audience, they understood that experimentation in television was necessary “in the development of the future of television” but for now ABC offered programs their listeners found familiar and comfortable, except now they could “see as well as hear it.”<sup>4</sup> Clearly the entertainment field was changing and the transition to television was one move Hildegarde did not make. She and Anna opted not to “do” television and that decision was a devastating blow to Hildegarde’s lasting legacy.

Hildegarde was popular before 1945, but her true heyday was packaged between her status as America’s number one female entertainer and her appearance on the television show *Person to Person* in 1954. She remained popular after the television appearance, but that was also the time when she and Anna began dissolving their relationship. Their break-up had a terrible effect on Hildegarde’s popularity. Nonetheless, 1945 was one of the most successful years of her career. Her image, by then embedded in the psyche of American audiences through her radio program *Hildegarde’s Raleigh Room*, her success selling war bonds, and her successful records, completed a transformation for Hildegarde into the embodiment of glamour and sophistication. It was Hildegarde’s image which sold consumer goods and which was copied by numerous stars who, unlike Hildegarde, remain part of the American historical record. For Hildegarde and Anna, 1945 set the stage for the rest of their lives together.

Yet, sadly, it was the “last hurrah” (so to speak) for both of them. By 1945, Hildegarde was nearly forty years old; her age worried her tremendously. She had been horrified when a *Life* reporter printed her true age, but since it was well known that she had performed in vaudeville and for silent movie theaters her age was most likely not the secret she hoped it was.<sup>5</sup>

The late 1940s for Anna and Hildy were successful but as the years wore on the relationship became more and more strained. Anna was always difficult and controlling, but in the late 1940s her behavior changed from irritating and dominating to a new level of manipulation peppered with violence. Her outbursts and anger were no longer kept between Hildegarde and their friends. It expanded to the point that by the early 1950s, she was physically violent with people outside of the fold including at least one manager of a supper club. Her rage, often fueled by alcohol, became a public spectacle which included overdosing on drugs, drinking too much, and on some occasions requiring medical sedation to calm her down. The reality of life for Hildegarde was the dominating factor in the break-up of the women. It was a long time in the making but a decision Hildegarde delayed because of the wave of popularity and earnings she had thanks to Anna’s managing abilities and innovations in the industry.

### **Hildegarde Rose**

By 1945, the war was in its final year and Hildegarde’s career entered yet another phase which lasted well into the 1950s. The hard work of the war years led to her path of becoming literally the most impersonated performer in show business. Hildegarde’s popularity did not wane as Americans entered the postwar years. Instead her popularity

grew and continued to change as the years passed. This new phase of the Hildegarde/Sosenko career started with major events both personally and privately, all occurring in 1945. The year set Hildegarde and Anna on a path toward earning large sums of money and dictating terms for most contracts. Her successes began in 1945 with two important events in Hildegarde's career and one event affecting Hildegarde's health and well being. Hildegarde's popularity soared even as her earnings garnered her the reputation of being the highest paid supper-club performer in the world.

One of the first rating systems to gauge the success of performers and radio shows was the aforementioned Hooperatings. C.E. Hooper started the system which bore his name. It used phone calls to measure popularity of personalities/programs on the radio.<sup>6</sup> The Hooperating system was slightly controversial because it concentrated primarily on urban areas which, in ways, limited the accuracy of its counts. Nonetheless, it was effective enough that by 1947 its major competitor, Cooperative Analysis of Broadcasting (also known as Crossley or C.A.B.), no longer existed. Meanwhile, Hooperating was becoming the target of its newest competitor, the Neilson Rating System.<sup>7</sup> *Billboard* relied on the Hooperatings to determine the movers and shakers in entertainment. In 1945, the Hooperatings were featured in their magazine. Once Hildegarde appeared in the May 12 rating, Anna took out a huge advertisement the next week, reprinting the chart but with Hildegarde's name dominating a two page spread in a larger than life headline and repeating the phrase "Hildegarde No.1 Songstress in America." Numerous performers with whom modern Americans equate the 1940s and who are entrenched in American memory such as Dinah Shore, Kate Smith, Perry Como, and Frank Sinatra were below Hildegarde in ratings points. The accompanying article

emphasized the fact that Hildegard rose from seventh place the previous year to take second place in 1945. Even though Dinah Shore was only a fraction behind Hildegard, it did not stop Anna and Hildegard from using the rating chart in advertisements. Kate Smith, another of Hildegard's radio rivals, dropped from second to eighth.

It is important to point out that both Kate Smith and Dinah Shore, though competitors, were relegated to radio and albums but were not specifically part of the night-club or the supper-club scene. They were not entrenched like Hildegard with Café Society. Hildegard's popularity was different from Shore and Smith in fundamental ways. Hildegard was not fulfilling a stereotypical role for American listeners. Hildegard and her image, sexuality, and style set her apart from both of these competitors even though Shore was close behind her in the ratings. Both Shore and Smith fit well within expected roles for women in American culture. They were both perceived as "good girls." This does not mean Hildegard played the role of the "bad girl." This in fact was not the case in spite of her very public and seemingly different relationship with Anna. The occasional reference to a love interest might appear in a newspaper article, but for the most part Hildegard and Anna chose to present Hildegard publically as single, professional, and unapologetic. She did not feel the need to talk about being a good homemaker, wanting children, or feigning interest in marriage. Coupled with the portrayal of Anna in the media in masculine terms and with no hesitation to admit that they shared their private lives, bank account, and domicile, a very different image of Hildegard and her *svengali* emerged. Hildegard remained "continental" long after she returned from Europe and long after the war. Because she was always linked to her European past, Hildegard's sexuality was measured differently

than those of Dinah Shore or Kate Smith. By continuously Europeanizing her, Hildegarde existed outside of expectations for regular American women. This same phenomenon was evident with Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo and their great popularity in this era despite of their questionable sexuality and the fact that Marlene cross-dressed publically. Both of these European women escaped the restrictions applied to American women in show business and lived outside of the “good” or “bad” girl dichotomy.

Dinah Shore’s path unfolded differently. She became the quintessential girl next door, an image carefully crafted for her to erase what show business executives felt was a look that was too ethnic. Shore, Jewish and Southern, underwent a metamorphosis of sorts to become the sporty, pretty, blonde girl next door. For the American public to accept her and buy her products, those around her felt she needed to escape her ethnic roots. Consequently, the Dinah Shore who emerged from radio ready to enter American’s living rooms on television was scarcely similar to her previous incarnation. Radio Dinah was dark complexioned with long dark hair, but after she underwent dental work, skin and hair bleaching, and rhinoplasty, she emerged looking oddly similar to Hildegarde. Although her transformation was slow, it was deliberate.<sup>8</sup>

While Kate Smith was Hildegarde’s radio rival, her closest competitor in the Hooperatings, was Dinah Shore. Just the month before Hooperatings declared Hildegarde as America’s No.1 Songstress, *Billboard* featured Shore on the front of their magazine proclaiming her as “No. 1 on the Frontlines and the Homefront.” This proclamation was based on vague impressions rather than specific, named polls.<sup>9</sup> Hooperatings was not mentioned at all and the revelation of Hooperating the next month which placed

Hildegarde above Dinah most likely caused *Billboard* to put Hildegarde on the cover in June proclaiming her as “No. 1 Femme Voice of the Airwaves.”<sup>10</sup> The difference between the two proclamations was that Hildegarde’s ranking was based on an actual poll and Shore’s was not. Shore appealed to “high-schoolers,” according to *Billboard*, something which Hildegarde never aspired to do. Shore was very close to Hildegarde in the Hooperatings: she received 15.7 percent of the polling while Hildegarde received 15.8 percent. The year before, Shore and Hildegarde had been in sixth and seventh place respectively. In 1945, Hildegarde managed to edge Shore out just enough that she truly took the title of No.1 Songstress. The difference in the rating was minuscule but the lasting effect at least for the next year was not. Hildegarde’s more sophisticated persona (she was after all ten years older than Dinah) came across as a draw for live shows, record sales, radio listeners, and consumers. This became more evident with Hildegarde’s next major offering in 1945.

Soon after the May *Billboard* article highlighting Hildegarde’s place in American hearts, one of the most important events for Hildegarde career occurred. It which emphasized Hildegarde’s importance in American culture and women’s fashions. In 1945, Revlon contacted Hildegarde and Anna to create and market a signature colored nail polish and matching lipstick called “Hildegarde Rose.” Revlon was on the forefront of marketing toiletries to women as well as providing new innovations in the make-up industry. The company made several changes in their products starting in the 1930s when they invented and introduced a new type of nail polish that was different than other nail enamel. Women loved this new product and it propelled Revlon ahead of its competitors. In another innovative move in 1940, the company debuted their new



matching nail color and lipstick.<sup>11</sup> These are some of the reasons that Revlon was so successful in the 1940s. Historically, the company is recognized as innovating new advertising methods in the early 1950s with their nationwide campaign for their new product called “Fire and Ice” which marketed overt sexuality to women.<sup>12</sup> This campaign in 1952 has been proclaimed by modern historians as something totally original in marketing products to women. The advertising campaign was cutting edge and sold a specific idea to women. Revlon convinced women that they could become the women in the advertisements, thus embodying their beauty and glamour.<sup>13</sup> This interpretation however, is not entirely accurate. The “Fire and Ice” campaign sold a sexuality to women that transcended Revlon’s nail polish and lipstick. But it was not the first time Revlon used this type of marketing to lure women to buy their products (and here is another example of Hildegard’s absence in the historical record).

The mid-1940s advertisements for “Hildegard Rose” nail polish and lipstick used much of the same language as the later (1950s) “Fire and ice” campaign. Instead of using a model, they used Hildegard, her personality, and lifestyle to sell her signature color which was pink with gold overtones. Revlon’s “Hildegard Rose” had the power to transform every woman into the glamorous “subtle chic” of Hildegard and her “champagne personality.” “Oh you lovely people! Hildegard with a song on her lips, a rose in her hand. Lovely Revlon –putting that rose on everyone’s lips and fingertips,” said one Revlon advertisement for Macy’s Department Store.<sup>14</sup> Another advertisement promised the nail color and lipstick provided “all the sparkle and sophistication of the incomparable Hildegard herself.”<sup>15</sup> Yet another advertisement asserted that the Revlon product was “as devastating as her champagne personality.”<sup>16</sup> Having a “champagne

personality” was obviously something that regular middle-class women dreamed of attaining, thereby lifting them from the mundanity of their lives and transporting them to the magical world of night-clubs and supper-clubs where everyone drank champagne. The nail color and lipstick debuted in the spring of 1946, just after the end of World War II when most Americans were weary of living on rations and within wartime restrictions. The first publicity featured a color photograph of Hildegarde at the piano in a stunning emerald green designer evening gown specifically made for the Revlon advertisements.<sup>17</sup> A nail color and lipstick which could lift a woman from their own world and insert her into Café Society was enticing.

The buildup to the debut of “Hildegarde Rose” occurred over months. Revlon executives threw parties for their new product and began showing up to Hildegarde’s performances.<sup>18</sup> At one point in December 1945, sixty Revlon people came to one of Hildegarde’s shows.<sup>19</sup> Clearly Revlon was excited about their new product and with the expense they went to with their color advertisements, they had a lot of optimism for the marketability of their new product. When Revlon and Hildegarde launched the new product, women were salivating to buy it. The product was a success. When Hildegarde appeared at Bonwit Teller, an upscale department store in New York City on January 28, 1946 for the product debut, Charles Revson, the owner and founder of Revlon, made an appearance.<sup>20</sup> At this event, Hildegarde autographed well over one-hundred boxes of “Hildegarde Rose” which came as a set in a box decorated with a piano and gloved hand holding a rose, with Hildegarde’s unique autograph across the box. A month and a half later, the Hecht Co., a successful Washington D.C. department store, decided to re-launch “Hildegarde Rose” at their Easter Fashion show held at the Statler Hotel in Washington

D.C., a place where Hildegarde found great success during the last half of 1945. On the morning of March 9, 1946, several thousand women arrived to come to the show. Two-thousand women were turned away from this event.<sup>21</sup> So many women were turned away due to the limited space (only two thousand available seats) that the Hecht Company issued a public apology the size of a full-page advertisement expressing their regret for the limited seating. Hildegarde was thrilled that she was “so popular, and loved, and famous!!”<sup>22</sup> These throngs of women attempting to meet Hildegarde spoke to her popularity at this time. “Hildegarde Rose” was readily available at other major department stores, yet women by the thousands wanted to see her personally. Modern Americans today are accustomed to seeing celebrities advertising cosmetics and it is easy to view the “Hildegarde Rose” as an earlier representation of what inundates modern U.S. media. Revlon’s campaign in the mid-1940s was much different than simply hiring a celebrity as a spokesperson. This was a color of lipstick and nail polish developed specifically for Hildegarde and named for her. She surpassed simply being a celebrity that promoted a product. She *was* the product. If a woman used “Hildegarde Rose,” she was Hildegarde too. This level of popularity lasted through the rest of the 1940s and well into the 1950s.

Hildegarde’s closet rival, Dinah Shore also became associated with Revlon in late 1946. Another matching nail polish and lipstick named “Ultra Violet” was marketed by Revlon. In fall of 1946, Dinah Shore recorded a song used for advertising Ultra Violet and Revlon’s special lip color, nail polish, and even a face powder which were the hue of “Unearthly Violet Fired with Rubies!” The song, “Who’ll Buy My Violets” was advertised in combination with the product as “the Ultra Violet Song.”<sup>23</sup> There was a

major difference between “Ultra Violet” and “Hildegard Rose,” and it speaks to the level of stardom and cultural influence of the two women during this time period. Shore sang the theme song for Revlon’s product, crossing boundaries between radio, advertising, and the record business. And by default, Shore was associated with the Ultra Violet Revlon product, but the product was not named for Shore.

It was most certainly Anna who hammered out the contract and possibly even sold the idea of “Hildegard Rose,” but the end result was that Hildegard’s product was fundamentally different from Dinah’s association with Revlon. Hildegard’s color was named for her specifically. It was not a product for which she simply sang a theme song. The product had her name, her autograph, and her signature formal, gloved hand holding a hankie. The Revlon deal with Hildegard occurred in July 1945, just about a month after Hildegard appeared on the cover of *Billboard* with her “No. 1 Femme Voice” label. This is significant because Revlon offered Hildegard a product with her name *as* the product name at the same time Dinah Shore was just shy of Hildegard’s ratings. If Revlon developed and sold a product with Hildegard’s name on it, they could have easily done it for Dinah Shore too—or even instead of Hildegard. Shore was ten years younger (30 years old compared to Hildegard’s 40 years) and proclaimed as the most popular singer among men, women, children, and soldiers. But she was not influential enough for Revlon to see her as a cultural game-changer or influential enough to lure women to buy a product. Hildegard fit the bill. Revlon’s executive business decision to join their product with the Hildegard brand was most certainly a response to the fact that Hildegard had already influenced women’s fashion, formal glove wearing habits, the sales of lace hankies, and women’s hair-styles. Her sophisticated glamour sold and sold

well to the American public. Charles Revson understood that. The irony of the success of 1945 for Hildegard is that much of it occurred while she was very ill.

For Hildegard, 1945 and the following year were not totally positive. She was riding a wave of success but it mattered little once the war ended and Red Skelton returned home. The opportunity for Hildegard to have her hit radio program, *Hildegard's Raleigh Room* came about because Red Skelton had left to serve in World War II. Essentially, Hildegard like thousands of women across the nation now lost her job. Her coveted Tuesday evening time slot and the *Raleigh Room* ended when Red Skelton came home from the war. Her show had been very successful and touted as one of the reasons her popularity rose so quickly in the Hooperatings. This is one of the most ironic yet telling parts of Hildegard's career because it illustrated the issues regarding men and women in the work place. No matter the industry, amount of money earned, popularity, or level of success when the men returned home from the war, women acquiesced, gave up their positions, and cleared the way for men to return to their former jobs. In reality, Hildegard and countless other women had little choice whether or not they continued in their positions.

The fact was Anna and Hildegard found great success with the *Raleigh Room*. The time spot was originally Red Skelton's and when Hildegard and Anna were appointed to take over the slot while Skelton was away at war, Anna and Hildegard established something new and completely different. They created an atmosphere which replicated the environment in which Hildegard had her most success, the supper-club. The stage for the broadcast and on which a live audience attended was set up with tables and linens. Listeners without leaving their homes or changing their clothes were present

in the supper club with Hildegard rubbing elbows with the celebrities and high society/Café Society who attended the recordings. It was widely reported Raleigh cigarettes, the show's sponsor, paid Hildegard \$10,000 a week for her work.<sup>24</sup> The *Raleigh Room* was a distinct creation but it only came about because Red Skelton had left for war. His show, one of the most popular on radio, was also sponsored by Raleigh Cigarettes and his time slot was coveted. It was in this spot where Hildegard's show debuted and built an audience of its own.

In spite of *Hildegard's Raleigh Room* being a success, it was not enough for Hildegard to stave off being removed in December of 1945 from the spot and moved to a different day and time, thereby allowing Red Skelton to return to his original schedule. Within a few months on the new day and earlier time, Hildegard's show changed from the *Raleigh Room* to the *Penguin Room* sponsored by Kool Cigarettes instead of Raleigh.<sup>25</sup> This new incarnation of Hildegard's radio program lasted from April until October of 1946. In October, Hildegard and Anna made another major change in the show with yet another a new sponsor and new broadcasting company. On October 6, 1946, Hildegard opened her new *Campbell Room* show sponsored by Campbell Soups and airing on CBS instead of NBC as with her previous shows.<sup>26</sup> This newest show was not as well received. In fact, it was panned by Jack Gould, the well known radio and television critic. Gould opened his critique of the show offering high compliments to Hildegard regarding her abilities and poise, and then opined why with her talent she needed to work "so hard at being the grand dame of radio."<sup>27</sup> He essentially felt, for this particular program, Hildegard tried too hard and was fast becoming a stereotype of herself. In addition to the less than enthusiastic review of the show by Gould, just a few

months into the show, in early December, Hildegarde became very ill and could not go on the air.<sup>28</sup>

On December 1, she attempted to go to rehearsals for her Sunday show and tried to sing but no voice came out. Throughout that previous November, she had been struggling with cold-like symptoms and was taking numerous treatments for her sinus problems and her vocal chords. The treatments kept her working a rigorous schedule of two shows nearly every night at the Persian Room in addition to her radio program. She and Anna called upon one of their long time friends and well known entertainer, Gracie Fields, to substitute for Hildegarde on her radio program and in the Persian Room.<sup>29</sup> Hildegarde and Anna were grateful to have someone to fill-in while Hildegarde underwent intensive treatments for her serious infection. Gracie kept Hildegarde from losing the contract and customers from losing money on their tickets, but Hildegarde was devastated because she could not go downstairs and perform. What made matters worse was the rumor mill immediately began speculating in trade magazines like *Billboard* that Hildegarde's show was going to fold due to her being sick. "Hildegarde Show Is Threatened by Singer's Illness" read *Billboard's* article which went on to say Ward Wheelock of CBS intended to "cancel the show."<sup>30</sup> Anna shot back in same the article that her contract was "non-cancellable" and was in effect until next fall. Hildegarde was only out a few weeks, but this negative press which was so quick to presume Hildegarde's show was on the way to being cancelled illustrated the fickle nature of the world in which Hildegarde and Anna existed. For Hildegarde's particular type of performing—in supper-clubs, night-clubs, and on the radio—the performance schedule was so physically demanding that it compromised a performer's health and vocal chords.

The throat ailments with which Hildegard struggled during the last part of 1946 were not isolated and were a regular part of her lifestyle. Because she performed so many times live each week, live on the radio once a week, in a smoky environments, and usually having drinks with friends after her various performances, her voice was compromised constantly. As the rumor mill echoed at the time, this put her very career at risk with each illness. However, it was not the only illness with which Hildegard struggled.

In addition to her constant battle with throat ailments, Hildegard struggled with her menstrual cycle ever since she was a teenager. In 1945, she underwent surgery and had an hysterectomy. The irony of her surgery is that it occurred during one of the most important years of her career. After suffering virtually her entire adult life with menstrual pain and extreme physiological problems associated her menstrual cycle, Hildegard finally became so ill that she scheduled surgery with a doctor in Chicago. Theoretically, by the 1940s, doctors performed hysterectomies only in cases where women had few other options.<sup>31</sup> This position is ironic when compared to what some medical officials from the era maintained about women's reproductive health. For example, most gynecologists and psychiatrists believed women caused their own sterility through psychological problems and that they sought careers as a rejection of their own femininity.<sup>32</sup> In Hildegard's case with her "female problems," it seems the hysterectomy was a last resort. For over twenty-years, she attempted to relieve her pains with assorted remedies. She saw doctors across the country and in Europe, including members of her family who were medical professionals. They suggested varied treatments including the suggestion her pains would end if she had a baby, which was not an option for Hildegard. Throughout the years she used over-the-counter pills,



prescription pills, douching, special exercises, hot water bottles, and whiskey, all which provided temporary relief in spite of the fact that each year her pain intensified. In the months leading up to the surgery Hildegard wrote in her diaries of awaking with pains so intense that her limbs became immobile and she needed injections of morphine to relieve her symptoms. The regular injections were the last treatments she used. The injections were powerful enough that she had great difficulty functioning after having them. So she and Anna scheduled the surgery during her summer break and presumably decided to go to Chicago so she could be near family as she recovered.<sup>33</sup>

Throughout the time before, during, and after the surgery, Hildegard never wrote in her diaries of any regrets at the loss of her fertility. She was glad to have the surgery and seemed to care little that she could not have children. This was consistent with her ideology throughout her life: she was not interested in having children, in spite of the fact child bearing was an the most important function and role for women in the Catholic Church. Hildegard rejected the notion that she needed to have children. This is reflected in her life-style decisions and her disinterest in marriage. Numerous times over the years she had men who swore their affection and love to her, and expressed their desire to marry her. Instead of writing in her diaries that she might be interested or expressing her interest in a family, she most typically wrote how “ridiculous” the idea of marrying these men was for her.<sup>34</sup> The remark that illustrates her view toward having children and a household occurred in 1930 when she was being treated by her uncle, Louis Germain, for her extremely painful cramps. He expressed to her that the only solution for the issue was for her to have a baby and she wrote, “Who wants that?”<sup>35</sup> Her attitude about this apparently changed little over the years. Hildegard was glad to get

the whole ordeal settled once and for all. Although she had some issues with infections for a while post surgery, she was in much better health afterwards. The surgery facilitated Hildegarde feeling well enough to carry on with more travelling and a work schedule which swung into high gear as she stepped into the spotlight as the highest paid supper-club performer and one of the most impersonated performers in entertainment.

### **Anna and the Queen of I Am**

The height of Hildegarde's career brought Hildegarde and Anna into the public spotlight in a new and distinct way. Celebrities exist under a microscope and although it is becoming more intense in modern times with changing technologies and the new style of celebrities known more for being infamous rather than famous, the scrutiny was no less intense in Hildegarde's era. News articles and various magazines from *Hush Hush* to *Collier's* carried stories for their readers bringing them ever closer to those in the spotlight. Hildegarde's fame brought her into the purview of this sort of press in a new way after her popularity of 1945. Part of this was no doubt due to her ranking in *Billboard* and the fact that the *Raleigh Room* took her nationwide in a way she had not experienced with any other radio program. It transported her from the glamorous star of supper-clubs and placed her in American's living rooms. Her Revlon product also meant more women wanted to become part of what they heard every week. Hildegarde's celebrity persona became more entrenched in American culture and her association as a spokeswoman in advertisements for various products became more important. The more than friendly association Hildegarde maintained with department stores continued to grow. The public's attraction to and enchantment with Hildegarde was not the only thing

which drew the attention of the media. Anna, in her own way, also brought much attention for the duo. Her representation in articles as a short, masculine overbearing *svengali* of Hildegard drew attention from the press as did her reputation, much deserved, of being rough and brash and notoriously difficult.

The time period after the war and into the early 1950s was the beginning of the era of television. Others of Hildegard's radio genre (like Dinah Shore, Milton Berle, and Lucille Ball) entered television during this time with their own shows, but Hildegard did not. Anna's vision and ability in creating exciting live performances in the venues of supper-clubs, night-clubs, and Hildegard's radio programs are undeniable; her vision of the future of entertainment, though, was blinded by what is evident now as an antiquated view of the nature and world of entertainment. Just as the record industry and friends at Decca believed that playing the recordings of their artists on the air would hurt sales, Anna embraced this old view of radio play and applied it to the new field of television. She felt Hildegard was a draw for audiences in person and that the public would leave their homes to see her. This meant they should not give away for free on television what people were all too willing to pay to see in person. This might have been for the best, there was no guarantee that Hildegard would have played well on television. Some historians, using examples like Hedy Lamarr as a case in point, argue that too much glamour on television did not play well for the audience.<sup>36</sup> This might have in fact been Hildegard's fate had she attempted to take her supper-club evening and cocktail performance into the living rooms of Americans. Her main appearance on *Person to Person* which occurred in the early 1950s and which will be discussed later proved to be

awkward for various reasons. There is no reason to think this would not have been the case if she had a weekly show.<sup>37</sup>

Even though Hildegarde did not move to television, this did not mean Hildegarde was not present in American life outside of the radio or her music. As her stardom increased so did her exposure in other ways. Hildegarde remained front and center in American culture during the late 1940s and into the early 1950s because she entered popular culture even more through products, advertising, and magazine articles. She became a “star” who was known around the country and in Europe. This meant that much of her private life became fodder for writers and gossip columnists. These writers found a receptive audience as the public, who was eagerly purchasing her products, were curious about her as is evidenced by the amount of fan mail she received and answered. As is the case with modern celebrities, people wanted to know everything about entertainers and several columnists capitalized on this. Not all of the portrayals of the Anna and Hildegarde were positive but it did not affect the influence or the public’s interest engendered by Hildegarde. Her level of popularity remained solid well into the 1950s, partly because Anna re-invented Hildegarde again in 1950. She remained well-liked in spite of the fact that Anna’s angry and raging behavior during the late 1940s and early 1950s left the privacy of their home and became public knowledge.

One of the most curious publications involving Hildegarde and Anna was a serial fiction story which appeared in *Collier’s* in its June 1946 issues. The author Vicki Baum presented a fictional account of two women who bore uncanny resemblances to Hildy and Anna. “The Long Denial” had two main characters: Marylynn, a beautiful singer, known by one name who was a singer and radio star and Bess Poker, her manager and

long-time friend who took care of Marylynn, working without a contract. The characters met when Marylynn stayed at Bess Poker's mother's boarding house. It was clear the author was making a statement about Hildegarde and Anna and the similarities continued with a heavy handedness. Marylynn was glamorous, strikingly beautiful, and beloved; Bess was, in her words, unattractive and had a face that "completely lacked in prettiness" with "heavy, blunt features bad features" that were "nothing but a bad joke."<sup>38</sup> Bess "suffered from an almost aching weakness for beautiful things and people." Clearly the author was insinuating that Anna was star struck and obsessed with being in the entertainment industry.

Still there were differences between real life and Baum's story. Marylynn had been married and divorced and had made the pronouncement she was quitting show business. It was this piece of information which drove Bess crazy and caused her to try and kill her best friend. The story explained in depth that all of the beautiful clothes, furniture, and furnishings were "shrewdly designed to impress Marylynn's image and personality on the hard-boiled cynics who made up most of the New York audiences." It was all the creation of Bess. Marylyn left to her own devices, chose tacky and gaudy clothes.

Baum simply recreated in her installments everything that was said and written about Anna and Hildegarde. There was no pretense that it was anyone else. Although the women were not lovers in the story, the title gave away the nuanced meaning Baum attempted to impress on her readers. "The Long Denial" was not just a fictionalized story; it read more like a tell-all, sharing the secrets of Anna and Hildy from their beginnings at the boardinghouse, down to the fact of Hildegarde and Anna sharing a bank

account, which meant that Anna was technically paid far more than the expected ten percent most managers made. The “similarities” did not end there; Marylynn even had her own signature color of fabric called “Marylynn Blue.” This story made Anna furious. Hildegard’s character had been painted in a good light: as beautiful, though not very smart. Anna’s representation was very smart, but angry and a killer. Even though Marylynn did not die in the story, Bess’ intentions were clear from the beginning. She had worked tirelessly for years for an ungrateful star who was no longer wanted her services. Readers that summer would have little trouble discerning who the story represented. This reality spoke directly to the popularity of Hildegard and to the notoriety of Anna. If they were unknown or not popular, a national magazine would never have published a month long series featuring the likenesses of Hildy and Anna. It is also important to point out that there was no indication in the publication who the characters were based upon, meaning readers understood enough about Anna and Hildegard that they did not need any explanation printed with the article.

This particular *Collier’s* installment was written by a well known author, which probably made Anna even more irate. Vicki Baum was the pseudonym of Hedwig Lert, a famous and popular author who garnered fame in Weimar Germany and eventually in the United States for her novel *Menchen im Hotel: Ein Kolportageroman mit Hintergründen*. This piece became a popular stage play in Germany and later on Broadway with the name changed to *Grand Hotel*. It was during the play’s original success on Broadway that “Vicki Baum” came to the United States, and after travelling extensively and meeting receptive audiences and entertainment executives, she opted to remain in the United States which was more safe than her home since Germany was fast

becoming dangerous for Jews. *Grand Hotel* by 1932 became a successful movie starring Greta Garbo. Vicki Baum's career was set for her American audience.<sup>39</sup> She continued to write very popular novels and occasionally printed them as a serial in *Collier's* before they went to publication. "The Long Denial" was one of her serials which she published later in 1946 as a novel, *Mortgage on Life*. This popular book published by Doubleday expanded on her original characters and spotlighted Mayrlynn/Hildegarde and Bess/Anna. Baum was recognized as a talented and beloved writer, and her newest installment *Mortgage on Life* was well received and reviewed. It was popular enough that it caught the attention of Hollywood and was eventually made into the movie, *A Woman's Secret* (1949), starring Maureen O'Hara with a slightly changed storyline. The movie was not successful, but no matter, Anna and Hildegarde were emblazoned in the storyline in perpetuity. The fact of the characters being based on Hildegarde and Anna was rarely mentioned in the press, but there was no doubt who the story was about, especially in light of Anna becoming angry over it. An example of the rare mention of Baum's story about Hildegarde and Anna occurred when a reporter referred to their lives being the "plot of a thinly disguised book."<sup>40</sup> Even then, neither Baum's name nor the title of her work was mentioned.

Vicki Baum did not present the women well but this representation paled in comparison to what a former *Life* magazine writer, George Frazier, wrote in his book, *The One With the Mustache is Costello* in 1947. Frazier was the longtime entertainment editor for *Life* and wrote about numerous celebrities in the magazine. He also had a regular column in the *Boston Globe* for which he became beloved in his hometown.<sup>41</sup> In 1947, he published a collection of some of his material from *Life* and a few new pieces in

his book. His publication had chapters dedicated to numerous, well-known celebrities such as Errol Flynn, Irving Berlin, and Hildegarde among others. Some of his subjects were notables from the entertainment industry who were not necessarily movie stars or singers but people like Toots Shor, a prominent and influential restaurant and club owner in New York who had one of the “hot spots” in the city. His establishment was named after him. Toots Shor, the business, was one of the most popular gathering places in New York City. Women could not enter without a male escort. That rule applied to most everyone except Anna Sosenko and Hildegarde who frequented Toots Shor for dinner and after performances. Frazier targeted the well-known like Shor and those who frequented his establishment and others like it. The majority of Frazier’s book was dedicated to particular personalities with a few chapters at the end which deviated from the rest of the book. These focused on Jazz and some Jazz artists, a topic that was one of his passions. Most importantly, the organization was clear: Chapter 1 was about Humphrey Bogart; Chapter 2 about Ted Williams, the baseball star; Chapter 3 about Toots Shor; and Chapter 4 was dedicated to Hildegarde. She and Anna were high on the list ahead of other celebrities such as Peter Lorre, Errol Flynn, and Irving Berlin.

Frazier claimed in his introduction that the material within his book was, for the most part, previously published in *Life* and while some editing occurred on certain pieces, they were essentially just as they originally appeared. This might have been true for his other chapters, but for Hildegarde’s and Anna’s section, this was not the case. “Anna and the Queen of I Am” as the Hildegarde/Anna chapter is titled, originally ran in the November 1, 1943 *Life* with the title “‘Hildegarde’: It will gross \$150,000 this year for the firm of Sell and Sosenko.” Clearly, Frazier made some sort of statement by referring



to Hildegarde, a person, as an “it” in the title. In the *Life* article, he was careful to give Hildegarde praise for her popularity and place in American culture but he got numerous “facts” about her life wrong, like her father’s profession, her playing in an orchestra with her sister, and the origins of Hildegarde’s name. He gave much attention and detail in his writing to Anna, giving a full description of her physically and of her temperament. The article discussed in depth Hildegarde’s salary (or at least Frazier’s interpretation of it) and referred to Hildegarde as “not a person at all but a commercial institution run by two partners, the Misses Sell & Sosenko.” He went on to say about Hildegarde’s performance: “What Hildegarde’s audiences witness is undoubtedly one of the most remarkable demonstrations of showmanship.” According to his interpretation, without a contract and sharing a domicile and bank account, Hildegarde and Anna were “the same person.” Frazier specifically gave Anna credit for creating Hildegarde the performer and selling her to America while they were still in Europe. He quoted Anna: “I made her a sensation long before she was a sensation. We’re in a phony business, all glitter and glamour, and you have to play phony to get along.”

Part of the book chapter was just as it appeared in the magazine, but Frazier for some reason took on a vitriolic tone towards both Anna and Hildegarde which verged on cruel. He began by outlining the fact that Hildegarde was in high demand, “earns a small fortune,” had numerous “prominent people” as friends, and was “repeatedly chosen in fashion polls as one of the country’s best-dressed women.”<sup>42</sup> She was, Frazier affirmed, by all appearances, an entertainer of “unmistakable talent.”<sup>43</sup> What he progressed to next was not as positive. He assessed Hildegarde as a “plain-looking” woman who in her cheap everyday dresses looked more like a “Wisconsin housewife” rather than one of the

best-dressed women in the U.S.<sup>44</sup> Hildegarde, according to this chapter, was a complete creation of Anna whom he described as a “chunky, dark-haired dynamo” who transformed Hildegarde, a talentless pianist and singer who wore her signature full-length opera gloves “because she cannot play well enough to keep herself warm.”<sup>45</sup> He claimed to only repeat what Hildegarde’s critics said about her. According to this piece, Anna and Hildegarde used “her quasi-alias” to avoid getting arrested “for murdering the songs she sings.”<sup>46</sup> He then reasserted a claim he made in the article that Hildegarde used “bad-taste” and poor judgment when circulating through her audience which was an important part of her show. His characterization was a Hildegarde who made bawdy remarks to her live audience. According to Frazier, Hildegarde was a simpleton whose singing ability was “inept.”<sup>47</sup>

Frazier’s assessment of the women was scathing. He took a brief break from his interpretation of their life and talent and repeated the same background information from the original article which contained erroneous information. He was even wrong about the year Anna and Hildegarde met. This early biographical information was only a brief respite within the chapter. His focus was on portraying Hildegarde and Anna in a particular light. As for Anna, he claimed she was a frustrated songwriter, and that by transforming Hildegarde into a svelte high-class performer she transposed her own desires to be a star onto Hildegarde. Anna’s ability to re-make the plain, untalented Wisconsin performer into the toast of the town was what Frazier called a “Svengaliesque accomplishment.”<sup>48</sup> Frazier made sure his readers understood that Hildegarde was also a devout Catholic who bombarded other Catholics with religious items. So this was the situation: Hildegarde was the marionette to Anna as the puppeteer. Frazier claimed that

Hildegarde was engaged three times but never married and now shared hearth and home with Anna, a woman who, he wrote, was “Rabelaisian in the extreme.” When he used the word “Rabelaisian,” he was making a definitive statement about Anna. For her to be Rabelaisian meant she had a bawdy, vulgar humor. He ended his chapter by making one last innuendo about Anna and Hildegarde. Apparently, it was a common occurrence in their Plaza Hotel suite, he insisted, for Hildegarde to be showing off her religious trinkets to guests in one room while Anna was in another showing guests risqué pictures.<sup>49</sup>

Anna and Hildegarde were appalled by his assertions and accusations, and they were not alone. The book was reviewed in the *New York Times* by Russell Maloney, the “Entertainment Editor.” Maloney opened his review by explaining to the readers that Frazier’s book was “a collection of brief biographical pieces that at one time or another seemed like a good idea to the editors of *Life*.”<sup>50</sup> The reader was given a partial list of those who appeared in the book. The essay broke down what Frazier had actually included as fact into the book. His “quantitative analysis” as he called it, estimated that “20 per cent of the material was of public record,” twenty-five percent culled from press agents, “30 percent more or less irrelevant background information about the subject’s work or manner of life; 10 per cent anecdotes told by the subject’s friends; 15 per cent anecdotes told by the subject’s enemies, and of insight, as the chemists say, a trace.” The review assessed the chosen topics as entertaining subjects: Frazier had “chosen his subjects well, for his purposes, with a single exception.” That exception was Hildegarde. “Mr. Frazier’s piece about her is a dismal bit of bad judgment.” Maloney went on to say that it seemed clear to him that Frazier targeted Hildegarde and Anna, was “openly out to

‘get’” them. In essence it was clear that Maloney maintained that Frazier’s chapter attacking Hildegarde had crossed a line. Maloney felt Frazier made an unwarranted attack on Hildegarde and then proceeded to use Frazier’s statements against him. The critic’s conclusion was that if it were true that Hildegarde was talentless and ridiculous on stage with no musical ability, yet was still able to garner numerous devoted fans who paid good money to see her live, then clearly Hildegarde had something that was a true rarity in show business. She was able to convince people of her abilities and then transfix them while they were at her performances: “by this account, the lady rises above mere talent and joins the tiny handful of personalities whose repertoire consists simply of their presence in a room.” He closed his article with the question: “is Hildegarde really as good as George Frazier says she is?”

Anna’s anger about the book was kept private. Dr. Morris Fishbein, a close friend of Anna and Hildegarde who lived in Chicago, sent Anna a letter and the Russell Maloney *New York Times* review of the book with a letter. He sent it because he felt Maloney paid “high praise” for Hildegarde.<sup>51</sup> Fishbein was interested enough in the issue to send a copy of the *New York Times* article from Chicago to Anna and Hildegarde who lived in New York. Because these friends had a great deal of trust between them, Anna’s letter back to Fishbein revealed her true feelings about the Frazier affair. Her ire and intellect were clear. Anna told Fishbein: “the lewd collection of pictures which he says I show to people, while Hildegarde is in the other room giving out Catholic medals, is at the Milwaukee Art Institute where they will be exhibited for two months beginning Friday night.”<sup>52</sup> She went on to tell him how many of the pictures were in the collection and then said: “it would be hard for me to say which was the dirtiest.” Anna felt Frazier

intentionally baited her and Hildegarde into filing a lawsuit against him, thus, creating a media frenzy for his book, thereby increasing sales. Her opinion was that if they sued “a writer for making up a lot of trash” the author would need to be “important enough to merit suit.” Frazier, in Anna’s opinion, did not meet this standard.<sup>53</sup> In the end, Anna felt Frazier’s lies to be “the price we have to pay” for the stardom.

The “dirty pictures” of which Anna spoke tongue-in-cheek was in fact a large and extensive art collection Anna and Hildegarde worked for years to amass. Rather than vulgar drawings, the collection represented some of the finest American artists and some renowned European artists as well. Anna and Hildegarde began collecting art in 1935 and added to their collection as often as they could. Eventually their collection included Renoir, Thomas Rowlandson, Mary Cassatt, Thomas Hart Benton, Grandma Moses, Eugene Boudin, Käthe Kollwitz, and George Grosz. Their collection totaled well over one-hundred pieces and covered most of the wall space in their Plaza Hotel suite. Anna developed an innovative idea to take the art on the road with Hildegarde to select venues. Sometimes, the art travelled on its own, but often it accompanied Hildegarde, showing while she was her contracted in different cities.

This art became an attraction, and in truth, it entrenched Hildegarde even more deeply within the high-class culture and sophistication. This is ironic since it was really Anna who worked to amass the art collection and to educate herself about the art world. Hildegarde cared little for this part of the art world and had little to do with picking the art for their collection. Anna sold a different story to the press, stating that both she and Hildegarde worked diligently to develop the collection.<sup>54</sup> According to Anna, the women chose paintings according to what they liked as well as because of its value or the artist

name. The president of Associated American Artists Galleries appreciated the art collection both because of their way of choosing this art and their support of living artists. When the collection travelled, the accompanying art books (produced by the venue for the patrons) were usually as well presented as the exclusive dinner menus from the classy hotels where Hildegarde performed. Portions of the collection were also loaned out for use in other art shows or as a showcase in and of itself to places like the Milwaukee Art Institute (where the art collection was first shown), Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh, Bronxville Women's Club, various art galleries, and some colleges for special events.<sup>55</sup> The art collection became yet another way Hildegarde and Anna entered the popular culture scene. This was possible because the stories about their art collection appeared in newspapers across the nation.

### **Yes Virginia, There Really Is a Hildegarde<sup>56</sup>**

In 1947, the year their art collection became available for public consumption, Hildegarde was riding her biggest wave of popularity. It was during this time period when Hildegarde became known for being “one of the most frequently imitated of all night club stars.”<sup>57</sup> Numerous photographs were published of well-known celebrities doing their best impersonation of Hildegarde. In early 1947, an article in *Liberty*, a New York City publication, featured captioned photographs of celebrities doing their best Hildegarde impersonation. The largest and most prominent photograph was of John Carradine in a Hildegardesque pose with a hankie. Also included were Victor Moore, Tallulah Bankhead, Milton Berle, Burgess Meredith, and Gypsy Rose Lee.<sup>58</sup> Meredith's pose showed him with the jacket of his suit adjusted until it hung off one shoulder, one

hand running through his hair, and a hankie waving in another. These photos were most certainly posed. They circulated in newspapers across the country in articles about Hildegard along with versions of the photographs showing the celebrities doing Hildegard with Hildegard herself.<sup>59</sup> Hildy had true impersonators as well. One in particular, Mitzi Green, a former child star, did numerous impersonations in her cabaret show, but became especially known for her satire of Hildegard. In 1945, Hildegard went to the Copacabana to see Mitzi impersonate her and enjoyed the show so much she sent Mitzi some of her famous hankies the next day.<sup>60</sup> Hildegard made the news by being so tolerant about Mitzi's performance, and in April 1946, she "did a stunt" with Mitzi at the Copacabana by getting up on stage and playing the piano for Mitzi while she impersonated Hildegard.<sup>61</sup>

Hildegard and Anna had become part of the "big time." They were no longer trying to get into a certain echelon of celebrity culture. They were a defining part of celebrity culture. In spite of the fact that Hildegard and Anna remained partially isolated due to the amount of work it took to prepare, rehearse, and produce the radio and live programs, they had numerous friends. Their world was that of the "celebrity" and their circle of friends reflected the world in which they lived. Tallulah Bankhead was a confidant as was Jack Bertell of MCA and his wife. They often saw people like Mike Todd, Burgess Meredith, and Victor Moore.<sup>62</sup> Famous people like Howard Hughes and Lana Turner came to see Hildegard in the Persian Room. Maurice Chevalier came to see her in 1947 and told her she was "one of 3 great artists in the world!"<sup>63</sup> The fact that her fan base included others in the entertainment industry, combined with the numerous

impersonations, showed that Hildegarde and Anna were established as part of the star culture. This is further proved with Hildegarde's inclusion in celebrity events.

In May 1947 when it came time for the National Celebrity Golf Tournament in Washington D.C., Hildegarde was included as part of the celeb line-up. This was high praise because Hildegarde played with some of the biggest names in entertainment and sports. Bing Crosby, Bob Hope, Eddie Arnold, Bobby Jones, and Babe Didrikson were all in attendance. Hildegarde played in the tournament as well as performed at the Statler Hotel in Washington. Her show was visited by some in the tournament including Babe Didrikson.<sup>64</sup> Reportedly, Hildegarde invited Babe onto the stage with her at the Statler and asked her for advice on her golf swing. Babe told Hildegarde to “take off your girdle and swing hard.”<sup>65</sup>

Famous stars were not the only participants. Numerous high ranking government people were included in the *Washington Post*—sponsored tournament. General Omar Bradley, Supreme Court Justice Frank Murphy, Attorney General Tom Clark, Admiral Chester Nimitz, and General Dwight D. Eisenhower were a few of the American military in attendance. Some of the most important people in the United States Armed Services and Federal Government played golf alongside Hildegarde and Babe. One photograph showed Hildegarde sitting with Omar Bradley and Bradley laughing as Hildegarde played with his hat.<sup>66</sup> That was true Hildegarde style, to always be “on stage.” But it also hinted at the level of comfort she and Anna developed over the years with the government officials for whom Hildegarde performed. Because of their connections in Washington D.C., Hildegarde and Anna became friends with people like Bess Truman. When the lines blurred between politics and Café Society, they also became close with



Elliot and Faye Roosevelt. Over the years, Hildegarde collected photographs of the rich and powerful of Washington D.C. attending her performances including J. Edgar Hoover and Harry Truman. When she played at the White House on August 26, 1945, Harry S. Truman actually performed Beethoven's "Minuet in G" for her.<sup>67</sup> On that same trip, Hildegarde and Anna had cocktails at an admiral's house, and visited and performed at Walter Reed. On another visit the year before to Washington D.C., Hildegarde attended numerous cocktail parties filled with powerful men and their wives including General Bradley's wife. It was during that visit when Hildegarde visited General "Black" Jack Pershing's room.<sup>68</sup>

Hildegarde's association with and support of the military ensured that she was beloved by service men in all the ranks. Her diligence selling war bonds created a devoted following. She was so popular with the local elite that in 1945 when a surprise birthday party was planned by the Treasury Department for Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, Hildegarde was the surprise performer.<sup>69</sup> During that special performance January 8, 1945, Hildegarde was taken on a private tour of his office by Morgenthau and his wife. The Treasury Department could have picked any performer they wanted but chose Hildegarde. It is this type of devotion that makes it amusing rather than a scandalous or offensive event when Hildegarde played with Omar Bradley's hat. It was her long relationship with the rich and powerful that put Hildegarde and Anna into the position of being involved with an event like the Celebrity Golf Tournament.

Hildegarde and Anna by the late 1940s started making the news as much for the celebrities who surrounded them as for her performances. It made national news when Christian Dior personally finished a dress for Hildegarde while she was wearing it. Dior

was famous enough that he did not need to have a “hands on approach” with dress fittings, but was keen to do it with a celebrity like Hildegarde when she was wearing his gowns. It was good for her business and good for his. Hildegarde’s stardom attracted attention and when she performed outside of New York it was expected that she would socialize with the wealthy and powerful of those towns. Other celebrities gushed at Hildegarde. Liberace, who “borrowed” much of Hildegarde’s stage show as well as his one-name only stage persona, gave her a hand-painted blouse which had a glove and hankie on it.<sup>70</sup> There were times when this attention made Hildegarde uncomfortable. In 1947 when Hildegarde performed in San Francisco, she attracted attention on the West Coast. One person in particular was one of her most interesting admirers. Dr. Margaret Jessie Chung was a local celebrity in San Francisco.<sup>71</sup> She was a physician and the first Chinese-American woman to receive a medical degree.<sup>72</sup> Dr. Chung gained fame locally during the war years when she hosted elaborate parties for American soldiers on their way to war. Hosting the men in her private home, she provided them with food and a bar and the opportunity to rub-elbows with prominent celebrities who also flocked around Dr. Chung.<sup>73</sup> In this way, she obtained her nickname of “Mom Chung.” Dr. Chung was an exception to the rule in her era: a Chinese woman who was a medical doctor and who was beloved by a wide range of Caucasians. Dr. Chung’s sexuality was also outside the boundaries of acceptance in the 1940s because she was a lesbian.<sup>74</sup>

In the summer of 1947, Hildegarde and Anna arrived in San Francisco for a highly touted performance in the Peacock Court at the renowned Mark Hopkins Hotel, one of the finest hotels in the city. On August 31, Anna and Hildegarde went to Dr. Chung’s home. Hildegarde wrote in her diary: “she is a fantastic woman her possessions

are priceless-she is adored by all.” Dr. Chung attended Hildegard’s performance that evening. A few days later, Dr. Chung and several others, including Happy Chandler (a beloved Commissioner of Major League Baseball and politician), who played with Hildegard in the celebrity golf tournament, came up to Hildegard’s suite after the second show.<sup>75</sup> Then Hildegard became ill with a cold. Rather than see Dr. Chung who was now well acquainted with Hildegard and Anna, Hildegard chose to see a different physician. On September 9, Dr. Chung sent Hildegard a bottle of perfume and then attended Hildegard performance that evening. She accompanied Hildy to her suite to tend to the illness. “Bless her wonderful heart!” wrote Hildegard.<sup>76</sup> The next night, Dr. Chung came up to the suite wanting to administer nose drops but Hildegard refused treatment. For her next performance, Hildegard received flowers from friends and a book from Dr. Chung which caused Hildegard to comment about how kind the San Francisco people were to her. After the book, Dr. Chung sent Hildegard twelve gardenias, a book of poetry, and fresh strawberries, and then came to Hildegard’s suite after the second show causing Hildegard to write “this is becoming embarrassing!”<sup>77</sup> On September 13, Hildegard, Anna, and several in their group were invited out for dinner as the guests of Dr. Chung at a Chinese restaurant. At this event Chung’s focus on Hildegard made Hildegard uncomfortable: “Dr. Chung too attentive to me—I don’t like it!!”<sup>78</sup> That did not stop her from going with friends to Chung’s home the next day for home-cooked food. It was evident Chung was more than just interested in Hildegard, that she was making advances towards her. In fact Dr. Chung threw one of her notorious parties for Hildegard as a farewell to her. It was lavish enough to make the newspapers.<sup>79</sup> Most interesting was that Hildegard said she did not like the attention

Chung paid her, yet she did not avoid her. In fact, Hildy wired her in October of the same year and kept in contact until Chung's death in 1959.

Dr. Chung's attraction towards Hildegarde was also reflective of the interest Hildegarde engendered in all of her audiences. Chung was part of what was the "cult of Hildegarde." Enthusiasm for her performances spread far beyond the United States. Her popularity was at a point in 1948 that she returned to Europe for several performances. Her schedule included shows in France, England, and Italy. She and Anna traveled Europe for an entire month. The end of the tour was to be at the place where she first played in Europe, at London's Café de Paris. It was her triumphant return to the place where her star was literally born. Europe was her training ground and where she learned to create an intimacy with her audience, an ability for which she was well known.

Unfortunately, while in Rome Hildegarde became extremely ill, no doubt due to her already troubled health related to her vocal chords. She had a difficult time recovering from this problem. It was reported in newspapers in the U.S. that Hildegarde had a bronchial lesion and was in a clinic.<sup>80</sup> This was true. Apparently, sometime after Hildegarde had a private audience with Pope Pius XII, she caught some sort of virus from which she had a terrible struggle to recover. During the extended illness, Hildegarde had a very high fever and a painful chest congestion which caused her to have coughing spells. Anna tried desperately to keep the entire episode out of the press, but was unable to do so since Hildegarde became too ill. Anna started trying to get her attended to by experts. It was Anna who actually drew the attention of the press and even though Hildegarde begged to keep the story from breaking, Anna was unable to control the news after it started to spread. Anna's choice was to tell the press exactly what

happened with Hildegarde's bronchial lesion, because the women wanted to avoid this treatment from looking like a suspicious medical procedure. The concern was that if the story broke without details, then people would assume Hildegarde had travelled to Rome to have an abortion. At the time, as Anna expressed to a friend: "so many people come here to get aborted then call it by other names." In any case, Hildegarde remained ill for several weeks and in true Hildegarde fashion, she was most concerned to get released to travel to London and make her performance at the Café de Paris—which she did.<sup>81</sup>

Once back home in the States, Hildegarde's star continued to shine. She resumed performing at her regular cities like Washington D.C., Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, St. Louis, and, of course, New York City. She and Anna also added some new venues and towns to her regular line-up. The most important new destination was the new up-and-coming entertainment destination, Las Vegas. In September 1948, the Thunderbird Hotel opened on the Las Vegas Strip. Only three other hotels were there on the Strip when the Thunderbird opened.<sup>82</sup> Just three months after its grand opening, Hildegarde appeared at the hotel for the Christmas and New Year's weeks at the end of 1948. Even though the Thunderbird was only the fourth on the Strip, it was built with the idea of tapping into a trend which led to Las Vegas becoming one of the newest vacation and gambling destinations. Gambling and entertainment was fast moving into Las Vegas, filling the void left when Los Angeles began cracking down on vice in 1938.<sup>83</sup> The Flamingo was already successful and others sought to cash in literally on this success. When Hildegarde arrived, she caused quite a stir. Newspapers carried advertisements declaring "Incomparable Hildegarde! The Greatest Feminine Entertainer in the World Today." It was suggested to make early reservations to ensure a seat in the supper-club

to see her. “At Last the Magic in Showbusiness Comes to Las Vegas” read the top of the advertisements. After she opened, several articles appeared in local newspapers which declared her the most enthusiastic performer in entertainment and claimed she had her opening audience of five-hundred, spellbound.<sup>84</sup> “Hildegarde, Hildegarde, Hildegarde, that’s all I keep hearing after the first and second show at the Thunderbird Hotel. I never saw such a crowd, not even at the grand opening of the hotel which was quite an event.”<sup>85</sup> Even the woman who booked the entertainment for the Flamingo Hotel, a rival to the Thunderbird, gushed about Hildegarde saying “Hildegarde is the most outstanding performer ever to be presented in Las Vegas!”<sup>86</sup> An irony here is that it was reported that during this same time period Anna and Hildegarde turned down a considerable amount of money to perform at a Florida club due to the fact the club was primarily concerned with gambling.

This Las Vegas show was just one of many as Hildegarde travelled across the United States taking her show to the American West in a concentrated effort for really the first time. San Diego, Las Vegas, St. Louis, and even Houston saw Hildegarde visit on the cusp of the 1940s and 1950s. When she opened in Houston, it was to great fanfare as she performed for three weeks in the Emerald Room of the Shamrock Hotel.<sup>87</sup> “Miss Show Business” opened to a full house with numerous people turned away at the door.<sup>88</sup> Hildegarde’s opening night “wowed” an audience of 750 and the reception planned for her by the hotel was also a grand affair.<sup>89</sup> Hildegarde brought with her all of the culture and sophistication of Café Society in New York City, just what a budding city like Houston needed. Article after article carried stories about Hildegarde, her performances, her European start in entertainment, her beautiful clothes, and all of the fanfare and

trunks which accompanied her to town. Her sister Germaine who lived nearby was often included in the stories and pictured with her famous sister. Some of the stories even told her salary at the Shamrock while there: \$9,500 a week.<sup>90</sup> Houston was so enchanted with Hildegarde that city leaders placed a full page advertisement in *Variety* which was an open “thank you” note to Hildegarde. “Because she has brought to Houston and to Texas a contagious spirit of joy and gaiety. Because she has delighted thousands of our citizens at The Shamrock with her famous songs and effervescent wit...” read the letter. “Hildegarde has made for herself a place in our hearts that will remain empty until she returns to us again.”<sup>91</sup>

The local reaction to Hildegarde across the country was the same. This is important because many assumed Hildegarde would not play well outside her own environment and established cities where she performed regularly. It was for this same reason that her rise to the most popular woman on the radio in 1945 was surprising. Many commentators felt she would not play well outside of the crowd who could afford the cover charge, dinner, and drinks, not to mention the clothes to see her live. But Hildegarde travelled well outside of her comfort zone. She returned to Europe in 1950 and was again well received. In Paris, she was called the “Female Maurice Chevalier.” For the newspapers and media Hildy’s clothes and the designers with whom she met while there, were as important as her performances.<sup>92</sup> Her reception was warm. The stories appearing in newspapers told of her humble beginnings in Paris in the 1930s and compared it to her newest appearance with more than three-hundred formal performance gowns.<sup>93</sup> After Paris she continued to Copenhagen and then back to England. Not long after her return from Europe, she embarked on another innovation of Anna’s, a new one-

woman show criss-crossing the nation. It is most likely Anna was inspired by the comparisons Europeans made between Hildegarde and Maurice Chevalier who was known for putting on a one-man show.

For her one-woman show, Hildegarde played in roughly seventy-five cities in two and a half years. For this newest innovation, Anna went a step further than any previous idea. *Time* magazine reported Hildegarde was on a tour of sixty-five one-night stands. The article also told of all of the regalia which accompanied Hildegarde on the tour.<sup>94</sup> She needed her Cadillac, five additional cars (to carry the rest of the people in her entourage including her bandleader, musicians, etc.), and a Mack Truck. Anna cleverly started blending advertisements for Hildegarde's one woman show in a way similar to the modern concept of "product placement" on television and in movies. For example, a Rand McNally map of all the cities where Hildegarde was scheduled to perform was placed as an advertisement on two pages of magazines such as *Variety*.<sup>95</sup> Each city was marked with a Rand McNally symbol. With this, Hildegarde's advertisement for her concert tour became an advertisement for Rand McNally. Most interesting was Hildegarde and Anna's relationship with the company Mack Trucks. She may have been the first performer to have a personalized large truck to carry all her belongings. It caused quite a stir. The cab of the truck was jet black with hot pink trim; the back of the truck was hot pink with a black gloved hand; a hankie and Hildegarde's autograph were emblazoned on the sides of the truck. Her hot-pink Mack Truck garnered a lot of attention. The Mack Company used it in advertisements telling the story of how the idea for a hot pink semi-truck was born. As it turned out Anna and Hildegarde were travelling aboard the S.S. America, having dinner with the vice president of the Mack Company



who suggested Hildegarde use one of their trucks to transport her things on her cross country tour. This added the S.S. America into the story, yet another company for whom Hildegarde advertised.<sup>96</sup>

The tour across the U.S. including small towns and even northward into Canada was successful, but it occurred over a time period during which Anna and Hildegarde were in a state of transition. In March and April of 1950, the women moved out of their luxury suite at the Plaza Hotel and into a large apartment. At the same time, Hildegarde's mother was in failing health; she became more ill over the early years of the 1950s. This put a lot of strain on Hildegarde and her relationship with Anna. Hildegarde, too, was becoming sick more often, no doubt due to performance pressures, smoking, alcohol, and continuous rehearsing. Most important was that Anna's behavior which had always been in some ways extreme was getting worse and extending past the privacy of the personal relationship between Hildegarde and Anna. The most terrible part was that Anna's angry outbursts and fits of temper started to become public knowledge. Stories about this made their way into published articles about Hildegarde and Anna. In 1949, Anna, Hildegarde, and Jack and Miriam Bertell had a very public falling out which was reported in *Billboard*. This was a couple which had been loyal and close with Hildegarde and Anna for many years. They went on vacations together and had personal snapshots taken on beaches, in restaurants, and at country estates. Often when Hildegarde and Anna travelled, Jack and Miriam vacationed with them. They even stayed in the same hotel. Yet in 1949, due to Anna's behavior, the story of their split became public knowledge. Part of this was due to Jack's position with MCA, but part of it was due to vitriol coming from both parties. As *Billboard* reported it, Hildegarde had switched from MCA to the

William Morris Agency; Anna came across terribly. “Miss Sosenko’s version of the split was that MCA and Bertell were trying to take Hildegard away from her” and then she claimed to have set a legal trap for MCA which had worked.<sup>97</sup>

The overtones were clear with “trying to take Hildegard away from her” meaning something more than just a business deal. Jack reacted to Anna’s accusations by saying they were “the damndest lies I ever heard.” He then went on to discuss the terrible fighting between Hildegard and Anna. For years he was “always in the middle.” According to Jack, “Hildy’s been trying to get away from Sosenko, and in fact, already made that decision herself.”<sup>98</sup> At the heart of their fight was the salary for which MCA booked Hildegard at two different hotels. The women announced to MCA that for 1949, Hildegard would work for \$6000 a week and not a penny less. Anna booked her into several places for more than that including the Shamrock Hotel for \$9,500 and the Palmer House in Chicago where she made the \$6000 a week plus a percentage of any gross over \$25,000.<sup>99</sup> MCA booked two shows for \$5000 each and Anna was furious. Unfortunately, justified or not, Anna’s feud and Hildegard’s salary were in the newspapers, on the front page of the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, and in trade magazines. That was bad for business.

Anna’s behavior was now having detrimental effects on Hildegard’s career. During Hildegard’s triumphant performances in Las Vegas, Anna’s behavior spiraled out of control. The new year of 1949 brought humiliation for Hildegard as customers in the hotel heard and saw the behavior of Anna. Their private lives became very public. People began complaining about the noise of Anna yelling; it got to the point that often management at hotels were often called to quiet the noise.<sup>100</sup> While on the road in 1950,

Anna overdosed on sleeping pills. Hildegard could not wake her up. Anna was rushed to an emergency room. After she was revived, she claimed to have had only four pills, a fact Hildegard doubted. Anna became enraged because Hildegard had taken her to the hospital.<sup>101</sup> Often Hildegard speculated that Anna was not making sense because she had taken too many pills—or had too much bourbon.<sup>102</sup> The more Anna descended into needing sleeping pills, the more frequent her lashing out at Hildegard became. Instead of improving, the relationship continued to degrade. This had a terrible effect on Hildegard's career.

### **The Beginning of the End**

The year 1954 was very difficult for Hildegard. On February 9, 1954, Hildegard's mother, Ida, died. Hospitalized for several months with a prolonged illness, Ida suffered for several weeks. Hildegard remained at her side throughout the last few weeks neglecting work and focusing solely on her mother. They were close and there is no doubt this passing had a serious effect on Hildegard which reached well beyond grief. It changed her life. Anna visited Ida in November 1953 but was not there during those final agonizing weeks. Hildegard retreated from her world of show business during the time she spent at her mother's bedside. Many in Milwaukee were glad to have her there and be able to socialize with a celebrity, but mostly she spent time with her mother, sisters, and friends she knew from childhood as they all gathered to see Ida before she passed away. Hildegard and Anna often exchanged letters over the years and during the time in Milwaukee they wrote to each other numerous times. Anna kept these letters for life. The interactions between Hildy and Anna have tones of sadness and

sympathy, but most were tinged with bitterness and anger from both women as they reconciled with the loss of a family member and yet continued offering cutting remarks towards one another. Their anger did not begin with Hildegarde's extended trip to Milwaukee. It had been brewing for years, and by early 1954, blossomed into a whole new beast.

Apparently over the years their fighting became notorious. Happening on stage, at rehearsals, in hotels, and at home, the fights became increasingly frequent and by the early 1950s, their fighting included physical violence. In spite of Anna being the most confrontational, she was not the only instigator of the fighting. Hildegarde intentionally provoked Anna but at some point Anna lost control and crossed a line into violence. Anna's power over Hildegarde was far reaching and included aspects of Hildegarde's performances. For instance, Anna worked the intricate lights that created ambiance and excitement during Hildegarde's shows. Anna was credited with inventing the innovative lighting and she felt only she could work the spotlights properly. It was not that she just choreographed the lights; she physically worked the lighting. As punishment to Hildegarde for perceived offenses, Anna sometimes blacked out the lights during Hildy's performances and often refused to work the lights while forbidding anyone else to control them either.<sup>103</sup> This type of behavior also included Anna mis-cuing the lights or sometime putting the spotlight on an empty microphone while Hildegarde sat at the piano singing in the dark. These occurrences were a great source of frustration and humiliation for Hildegarde professionally. A specific example of this occurred on August 29, 1950. Anna and Hildegarde had been fighting over Hildegarde's band leader. Anna wanted to fire him and Hildegarde wanted to keep him. She felt he had done nothing wrong to

deserve Anna's punishment. To pay Hildegard back for siding with the bandleader, during the August 29 performance Anna blacked out the whole stage and put the spotlight on the bandleader in question.<sup>104</sup> During that particular performance, in addition to leaving Hildegard in the complete blackness, Anna also put the spotlight on the microphone which was standing alone.

Virtually every night in Memphis for two weeks in November 1952, Hildegard worked the stage with one stationary light. During that month, several other incidents served as examples of Anna's tyrannical behavior. Hildegard tried to avoid Anna's wrath by refusing to answer her door at the hotel. At one point Anna caused such a scene yelling at Hildy's door, two men came to physically remove Anna to her room.<sup>105</sup> Another time, Hildegard heard Anna yelling during her performance and was told later that Anna slapped a man's face and kicked him in the shins backstage. Although Anna told Hildegard he twisted her wrist, Hildegard was sure that if he touched her it was because she was being violent. On November 9, 1952 Hildegard answered her door to Anna and she kicked Hildegard in the shins. One week later, Hildegard opened her door again to her and Anna flew into a physical rage tearing Hildegard's robe into pieces. Throughout the month of November which Hildegard and Anna spent on the road, Anna repeatedly called Hildegard in her room or at the theater, leaving rambling, insulting messages with Virgie, Hildegard's maid. Then Anna would calm down, become contrite, and beg and cry to have Hildegard be kind with her while telling her she was suicidal. This was not an isolated month. This was a pattern that continued to repeat itself. Hildegard expressed her deep need for peace even though Anna was not the only one at fault in regards to the fighting.<sup>106</sup>

It was not just Hildegarde who felt Anna's behavior was erratic and out of control. If it were only Hildegarde's version of Anna's actions, there could be doubt about the severity of Anna's behavior and attitude. Anna focused her abuse on Hildegarde, but she was not the sole recipient of Anna's angry tirades. Apparently, Anna also treated others who worked in her productions with disdain, causing angry and harsh feelings. One telling letter came from a musician in Chicago with whom Hildegarde worked at an engagement at the Palmer House. He expressed his appreciation for Hildegarde and her professionalism and followed with "And to you Anna, words can't express my thoughts about you."<sup>107</sup> When taken into account how others felt about working with Anna, there is little doubt what this musician meant with his words. More direct was a letter Anna received from Salvatore Gioe, the bandleader over whom Hildegarde and Anna fought in 1950. In this same time period, Gioe responded in writing to Anna's offer for him to travel with them to Europe and perform with Hildegarde. He opened his letter with frustration, expressing his irritation that every time he had a discussion with Anna, regardless of the topic, she became "ill-tempered and quasi-furious."<sup>108</sup> He left little doubt about Anna's temperament and reaction. The intent of the letter was to politely refuse the offer to travel to Europe because the money offered was not enough. Most interesting is that Anna added a postscript to the letter saying: "So he went anyway but it had to be a production," thus displacing any legitimacy of his argument.<sup>109</sup>

Hildegarde kept numerous letters from friends offering advice and consolation to her in dealing with Anna's behavior. Ida, Hildegarde's mother, tried to console Hildegarde because she had witnessed Anna's behavior personally. Ida and Anna were

friends and Ida expressed to Hildegarde that she hated to see them break-up. Anna and Ida often exchanged affectionate letters. Ida signed her letters to Anna, "Mother Sell." Earlier in the relationship, when Anna and Hildegarde were fresh from their triumphant return from Europe, Ida wanted Hildegarde to be mindful of Anna's temper and encouraged her daughter to be more "meek and humble."<sup>110</sup> By the 1951, Ida wrote to Hildegarde expressing her concern for Anna's temper and drinking problem, referring to her as "boss of the world."<sup>111</sup> Ida warned Hildegarde to keep her letters hidden from Anna and wished for her daughter's sake that Anna would stop drinking.<sup>112</sup> Ida indeed wanted Hildegarde to be meek and mild, and not fight with Anna. She explained to Hildy that "a real lady" does not fight or "make a scene."<sup>113</sup> She warned: "You have no idea how people talk about (you know who) that she screams and yells so and uses such awful language when she phones etc."<sup>114</sup> "You know who" was Anna and it was obvious that Ida was concerned for Hildegarde's private and professional reputation.

Hildegarde's friends echoed this concern about Anna's temper and about protecting Hildegarde's reputation because Anna's behavior attracted so much negative attention from those who heard her fighting with Hildegarde. One of Hildegarde's longtime friends, Fritzi, expressed concern over Anna's behavior which was very public even while travelling. Hildegarde's friend on more than one occasion expressed to Hildegarde that her reputation was strong but that Anna was tearing it apart. Anna's behavior was so abhorrent that Fritzi said people continued to talk about it after they left town.<sup>115</sup> Fritzi also heard that Anna and Hildegarde had trouble when Hildegarde performed in London. The fighting became so notorious it made its way into Walter Winchell's syndicated column on April 5, 1954. This caused Hildegarde a great deal of

embarrassment while on the road in Buffalo.<sup>116</sup> The fact that Anna's behavior made a column like Winchell's' enraged Hildegarde.

The most damning evidence of Anna's behavior appears in a letter to Hildegarde from their physician whom they both used. He specifically requested Hildegarde destroy the letter after she read it. He explained to Hildegarde that he had "quite an experience with Anna when she was last here." According to the doctor, Anna was "without doubt a psychological case. And you are her subject of abuse." The doctor continued telling Hildegarde there was no cure for Anna and then offered Hildegarde advice on how to deal with Anna's "violent temper." He instructed Hildegarde to be "the judicious one." When Anna's temper flared "keep quiet" because Anna had the "strength of a demon" which meant she could out talk and shout over anyone. It was necessary that Hildegarde establish her own way to handle the situation from a business standpoint and establish more independence to impress upon Anna that she was not "indispensible." Most importantly, he told Hildegarde he was mailing a prescription for Anna that Hildegarde was to dole out and not allow Anna have the medication in her possession.<sup>117</sup> The advice from the doctor is important for several reasons. His advice to Hildegarde mimics that given to Hildegarde from Ida. It is also is more akin to the type of language used to convince wives they needed to be subservient to their husbands. This provided an interesting view of the perceptions of friends and family about Anna and Hildegarde. "Mother Sell" and their doctor regarded them as a couple that needed to be kept together.

By the early 1950s, this relationship was obviously filled with domestic violence and substance abuse. Despite her mother's advice to avoid engaging Anna when she was in the throes of a fit, Hildegarde occasionally lashed out verbally and often with letters to



voice her position toward Anna. Hildegarde and Anna lived together and toured together most often sharing the same suite while on the road. Yet in spite of this, they communicated frequently by letter. For Hildegarde this most likely was a convenient way to avoid Anna's wrath. Anna's letters gave backhanded compliments to Hildegarde and praised her while at the same time admonishing her and often threatening her. Her criticisms of Hildegarde cover a wide range of topics. For example, in a letter on September 10, 1952, Anna thanked Hildegarde for two pins she gave her and promised she would wear them and "overlook the fact that they are light weight silver." She assured Hildegarde she would wear them "as I would a platinum diamond ruby pin." She continued complimenting Hildegarde and telling her she had never "seen such a beautiful-young-handsome woman." Her contention was that if she (Anna) truly caused Hildegarde suffering and had truly "tortured" her and put her through "HELL" as Hildegarde contended, then she (Anna) should never soften her behavior because it had created a "stunning woman" who has a "superb performance (when directed)." By this means, Anna took credit for Hildegarde's performance, suggesting it was only good because Anna directed her, abused her, and then took credit for her beauty.<sup>118</sup>

It is obvious through extant letters that this type of berating and controlling language dominated most of Anna's letters to Hildegarde. Anna turned their notorious conflicts, into her fighting for Hildegarde and her career, making these battles "honorable."<sup>119</sup> Anna admonished her inability to become meek and mild as Ida wanted. Anna was careful to point out that Hildegarde was "not all angel" and was known for being demanding.<sup>120</sup> Interestingly, Anna told Hildegarde at one point the "it is I WHO AM AFRAID OF YOU," writing all in caps. She stated that Hildegarde's family did not

know her any longer and they now considered her “an event.” She followed with “you haven’t a single friend in the world but me.”<sup>121</sup> Without doubt, wording like this was meant to manipulate Hildegard into allowing Anna to continue as her partner and remain in control of her. Anna also wanted to further isolate Hildegard by making her question the loyalty of her friends and family. After Ida became ill, Anna continued her attacks on Hildegard by being mean about Hildegard’s family and speculating that Hildegard’s family got “a funny excitement over illness,” this in response to Hildegard being consumed with worry about her mother’s failing health.<sup>122</sup>

On Friday evening of May 7, 1954, Americans tuned in to their local CBS stations to see Edward R. Murrow’s *Person to Person* television show. On that night, instead of having the standard interviews of two people, Murrow devoted his show to two people who lived together, and shared both public and private lives, Hildegard and Anna. The format of the show was unique and new. Murrow remained in his studio while he interviewed guests within the sanctity of their homes. The show broke new ground using cameras stationed in a remote location to relay both sound and film back to the studio. It allowed instantaneous interaction between host and guests. This type of production necessitated a great deal of preparation before the broadcast. For Anna and Hildegard this meant camera crews showed up to their home days in advance of the broadcast. They dismantled and stored most of the furniture in their home to make paths for their bulky and heavy cameras and microphones, not to mention their large bundles of cables which ran throughout the apartment. *Person to Person* was still relatively new on the air when Hildy and Anna appeared. The first broadcast was in October 1953 and was an

immediate success because, as Murrow surmised, people had insatiable appetites for information about the private lives of celebrities.

In the time period leading up to Hildegarde's appearance on *Person to Person*, life in the women's household was grim. The fighting which plagued their relationship by this time dominated almost all interaction. Hildegarde was deeply depressed. Only days before the filming of the show, she expressed that she hated the apartment and could not "wait to get out."<sup>123</sup> According to Hildegarde's diaries, Anna's moodiness bled into every relationship with friends and colleagues; they too increasingly lost patience with Anna's lashing out. Much of the stress between Anna and Hildegarde stemmed from the fact that by now, they were in "dire financial trouble."<sup>124</sup> Finances were so bad that Hildegarde cashed in two bonds for \$500 each, even though just six months later the bonds would have matured. Hildegarde needed the cash to "pay [the] balance of [the] funeral bill" (\$486) for her mother's burial.<sup>125</sup> Anna manifested her stress with outbursts and anger; Hildegarde manifested her stress with depression and physical ailments. Hildegarde's performance schedule, driven as much by their need for money as her desire to be on center stage, was taking its toll on Hildegarde. Plagued with throat and sinus ailments since the late 1930s, Hildegarde struggled with a continual cold. Treated with everything from penicillin to home remedies such as whiskey, the cold she had just before the television appearance left her voice compromised, although it would be difficult to tell from the live performance with her own grand piano in front of television cameras in their formal living room.

When Murrow introduced Hildegarde, she was standing in a satin formal evening gown. She moved through the apartment into a room where Anna was, and they sat

together in the study and answered questions. Hildegard by this time was certainly a seasoned professional but she did not seem so on the screen. Most striking is the immediate sense the viewer gets about the differences between Hildegard and Anna. Hildegard is svelte, elegant, and graceful, and although uncomfortable, well spoken. Anna was short, stocky, and talked with a slight speech impediment. She seemed uncomfortable with the interview and with her clothes. For the broadcast, she chose to wear a formal evening gown just like Hildegard. Once they moved to the piano, both women sat at the piano and talked about performance and about Hildegard's signature piece, "Darling Je Vous Aime Beacoup" which Anna wrote. The status of their relationship was difficult to disguise. As Hildegard was speaking, Anna began to play the piano over Hildegard's response to Murrow. At this point, Hildegard reached to grab Anna's hand to stop her from playing but caught herself just before she does so. Then Hildegard played and sang. Her charm and talent were obvious. The last exchange between the women at the end of the broadcast showed Hildegard bragging about a football given to her by the Ohio State University football team who considered her good luck. Anna was quick to point out that Hildegard knew nothing of football.

Overall the program went well but the awkwardness belied the truth about the women's household. It was filled with turmoil and strife. Hildegard left for an engagement only a few days later, and according to her diary, she left town crying. Not only was she stressed about the continual fighting with Anna, but apparently a review of the CBS program from a newspaper in Chicago talked in terms that Hildegard felt presented them, in coded language, as a lesbian couple. The article in question said the "girls appeared home alone together."<sup>126</sup> On the surface, this remark does not seem to be

offensive, but Hildegarde took it as such and did not like what she considered to be the innuendo in it. This reference, coupled with the continuous turmoil with Anna, led Hildegarde to write Anna a nine-page letter on Hotel Texas letterhead explaining that she could no longer live with her or continue their relationship. The letter read as if Hildegarde is breaking up with Anna for good. She told Anna that she was getting to an age where she needed peace. Hildegarde made it clear to Anna she was going to get her own lawyer to separate their estate. She carefully made insulting remarks obviously meant to hurt Anna. For instance, she complained that the pianist Anna hired to play with Hildegarde was sub-par and might be fine for a “Jewish orchestra pit” but was not high enough quality for her. Most importantly, Hildegarde told Anna that the country home which Anna was so enthusiastic about and which she kept photographs of in a book was unimportant and she did not even want to see any pictures of it. The letter continued, naming the numerous issues Hildegarde had over the years, which she claimed she could no longer take. For Anna, Hildegarde leaving was not an option. Her response was specific. Anna never intended to let Hildegarde go. Anna essentially told Hildegarde that she owned Hildegarde’s career.<sup>127</sup>

There is no doubt that Anna and Hildegarde loved each other in spite of the fighting and stress of their relationship. Both used cutting words to hurt the other in their letters but they also continued to show deep affection for each other. Even in the darkest days of their relationship in the early 1950s, both Anna and Hildegarde wrote to each other expressing their love and using an occasional French word which most likely mimicked their private way of speaking to each other. “I meant it from the bottom of my coeur when I said I missed you...for I often get a funny lonely ache inside of me, not

seeing you around,” wrote Anna to Hildegarde on February 1, 1954.<sup>128</sup> “Love Beaucoup” ended one letter to Anna and another concluded “I do love you malgré tout” in spite of everything.<sup>129</sup> The language also gave an insight into Anna’s inspiration for writing “Darling Je Vous Aime Beaucoup.” Their expressions of affection were in virtually every letter, with Anna expressing her devotion and Hildegarde expressing her appreciation for Anna’s hard work. Hildegarde’s gratitude seemed sincere, telling Anna that she appreciated her efforts on her behalf and that no other manager could do as much or had “that magic touch.”<sup>130</sup> Anna frequently returned the compliments, expressing how beautiful Hildegarde was and at one point saying that Hildegarde “looked like a poem, goodness- in all of my life-never have I seen such a beautiful-young-handsome woman-you are ageless.”<sup>131</sup> Sometimes, Anna ended her notes with “Love ??????”, questioning either if she meant it or Hildegarde felt it.<sup>132</sup>

Anna wrote numerous letters to friends and family as did Hildegarde during this same period. The language in them is significantly different than the way Hildegarde and Anna interacted with each other. During the same time period that Anna wrote antagonistic angry letters to Hildegarde, she corresponded with other people who were dear friends, such as Fanny Holtzmann, the most prominent female lawyer in the United States. Holtzmann’s career focused on celebrity and entertainment clients. She was well known and respected in America and Europe, and was a close friend of Anna.<sup>133</sup> Anna’s letters to Fanny were engaging and intelligent, mixing some Yiddish, German, and French within the text.<sup>134</sup> Anna who was travelling with Hildegarde wrote to Fanny about how much she missed her and their conversations. Obviously the two shared an intellectual discourse as Anna discussed politics and the communist scare, declaring she

is no longer “using the word ‘red’ anymore...until it is respectfully returned to its’ rightful place among words..a very lovely, vivid color of life and vigor.”<sup>135</sup> Anna shared with Fanny stories about Hildegarde, some of their arguing, and the trials and tribulations of shipping their Cadillac to Europe to drive while they were there.<sup>136</sup> The harsh and critical language found in Anna’s letters to Hildegarde was missing in these letters to Fanny as was any expression of affection. It was still clear that the two women, Anna and Fanny shared a close relationship.

### **Afterwards**

In January 1955, Hildegard was clearly splitting up with Anna. No longer living together, the women had grown too far apart to save their relationship, either private or professional. At first, Anna continued to manage Hildegarde’s career, even though they lived separately. Hildegarde felt she could no longer take the abuse from Anna. Moreover, she was surrounded with people who continued to impress upon her that Anna was not handling her career well. By this time, their financial problems were considerable. Hildegarde lived in a hotel and wrote in her diaries that she could not even afford dinners and had been forced to eat at the local drugstore. Before they officially split, Anna and Hildegarde borrowed \$15,000 from one of their business associates, something which horrified Hildegarde.<sup>137</sup>

Hildegarde had their lawyer draw up papers to make the split official. For a long time Anna refused to sign them. Hildegarde slowly retrieved her things from the old apartment when she knew Anna was gone, something which angered Anna even though Hildegarde packed only her things. Even after they broke up, Anna continued to call

Hildegarde, fight with her over the phone, hang up, and then call again. Often it was Hildegarde who called Anna back. Both women struggled with the breakup as if neither one could face the reality of the situation, as exhibited in Anna's anger over Hildegarde retrieving her own belongings or Hildegarde continuing to talk about Anna and bragging about her abilities.<sup>138</sup>

For Hildegarde's career, the separation proved devastating. She continued performing throughout the late 1950s, but feared constantly of becoming a "has been."<sup>139</sup> She continued travelling the country with an orchestra and performing her standards as well as new music, but it was clear from her financial woes that her celebrity status was waning. The separation of Hildegarde and Anna made newspapers across the country. *Billboard* speculated Anna's absence actually improved Hildegarde's performance. But the tabloids picked up the story of the breakup and published stories Hildegarde swore were full of lies. The tabloids carried the stories nationwide in a magazine format which appealed to a wide range of readers and spread sensational stories to a broader base of the American public. Hildegarde hated that her private life had become so public. She was very upset about an article which appeared in *Inside Magazine* against which she felt powerless to defend herself. Most upsetting for her though was an article which appeared in *Hush Hush*, a well known tabloid. The story in *Hush Hush* originally circulated as fact in the syndicated column of Drew Pearson on January 24, 1955, before the breakup of Hildegarde and Anna. This story was scandalous, and although the content of the Pearson article did not change, it appeared with varying headlines such as "McClellan Rushed By Night Club Singer" in Uniontown, Pennsylvania, "Fun at White House" in Hutchinson, Kansas, and "Washington Merry-Go-Round" in Oxnard, California. No



matter the headline, the scandalous article muddied Hildegarde's name across the country.<sup>140</sup>

This particular story told of Hildegarde performing at the White House for President Dwight D. Eisenhower and his dinner party on January 19, 1955. Hildegarde dined with the president and his wife and eight guests. After dinner, Hildegarde changed and then performed for the party. During the event, Hildegarde did her usual shtick of pulling a man, preferably pudgy and balding, out of the audience to dance with her. The man Hildegarde chose at the White House dinner was Senator John McClellan from Arkansas and who was known for being humorless, something evident from a *Time* news story about him titled "THE SENATE: The Man Behind the Frown."<sup>141</sup> Hildegarde noted the event in her diaries and was glad to have performed at the White House. The next week, Pearson's article appeared across the nation but his version of the story painted a scandalous picture of the evening. Hildegarde, according to Pearson, danced with McClellan and "proceeded to whisper sweet and sometimes risqué nothings in his ear" in front of his wife. According to this story, McClellan was appalled as was his wife. Eventually Hildegarde returned him to his seat. Pearson also said Hildegarde "made eyes" at the president during the evening. Ironically, this version of the performance at the White House appeared in newspapers the very day Hildegarde "received a charming letter from Pres. Eisenhower."<sup>142</sup> Unfortunately the private letter from Eisenhower could not help what happened with the story.

"How Hildegarde Got On the White House Blacklist" read the headline on the July 1955 *Hush Hush* magazine.<sup>143</sup> The tabloid picked up on the article originally published by Pearson and embellished it with scandalous accusations. George M. Frank,

the author, swore in his article that Walter Winchell mentioned the event briefly in one of his articles by saying that “a famed femme entertainer will be dropped from White House parties because a Senator was embarrassed.” Other than that, the event was not mentioned again until this most recent story. Frank provided details: the woman in question was Hildegarde and the senator was John L. McClellan. It happened “on January 23, 1955, at the White House dinner for Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn,” the magazine explained.

Part of his story was true. In early February, Walter Winchell reported in his syndicated column exactly what Frank repeated. The party at the White House was a dinner for Sam Rayburn, but the date was wrong. Frank insisted the story was only mentioned briefly by Winchell which was clearly not correct since Pearson’s article appeared *before* Winchell’s snippet and carried a lot of detail in it. The *Hush Hush* piece insisted that the story of Hildegarde’s shocking behavior had been circulating in the rumor mill in Washington D.C. since the dinner. In the tabloid version, Hildegarde had performed drunk and Hildegarde embarrassed McClellan by forcing him to dance with her as well as flirting “with him outrageously” in front of his horrified wife. Frank made sure his readers knew Hildegarde was old or “somewhat overripe,” (old) as he put it, and had a “phony French accent.” For this tabloid, Hildegarde was a predator who “snatched” the senator out of his seat and had been drinking.<sup>144</sup>

It is difficult to know for sure but is most likely this story had some effect on Hildegarde’s career. Soon after the dinner, Pearson’s version of the story appeared in everyday newspapers. But months later *Hush Hush* looked to cash in on the tale, leaving the question of motive for printing a story so far beyond the actual occurrence. The *Hush*

*Hush* article appeared right at the time Hildegarde's and Anna's breakup was in the news. It seemed this latest account was an easy way to capitalize on that story as well. Both incidents left very negative views of Hildegarde in the public arena. It made her look salacious, tawdry, and hypocritical. For the fans, it appeared that while Hildegarde publically proclaimed her religious devotion and loyalty to Catholicism, she in fact lived a double life. Directing sexual innuendos toward a senator was one thing, but to feel free to be inappropriate in front of highest ranking officials of the U.S. and with the president of the United States allegedly showed her true colors. The accusations were something she vehemently denied in her diaries.<sup>145</sup> The problem was she did not have a way to combat the rumors. In any case, whether or not the story really happened probably mattered little for those who read Drew Pearson's column or *Hush Hush*; for them, the story was fact.

### **Conclusion**

The *Hush Hush* story did not cause Hildegarde to fall from popularity, but it certainly impacted her public image. In addition to the accusations of impropriety, Hildegarde's age played a prominent role in the story. The truth is she had been in the entertainment business for such a long time that being coy about her age became pointless. When you have had a theme song for nearly twenty-years, it erases the mystery of a numeric age. As a matter of fact, adding insult to injury, in 1955 Nat King Cole's recording of Hildegarde's theme song "Darling Je Vous Aime Beaucoup" became a charted hit which was another indication of how long Hildegarde had been in the business. That same year—the year of the breakup and the scandalous *Hush Hush*

article—Hildegarde appeared on the television shows *What's My Line* in May 1955 and Arthur Murray's variety show in June 1955. She hoped her appearance on the latter would help to propel her into a television career. Hildegarde did well on *What's My Line*, but unfortunately, those closest to Hildegarde told her that the appearance on the Arthur Murray's variety show was not as successful as she had hoped. She felt she looked bad on the show and some of her friends told her that the dress she chose did not look good on the small screen. This was ironic since Hildegarde changed her wardrobe at the last minute because she felt her original evening gown was too sexy for television.<sup>146</sup>

Hildegarde's star remained bright enough during the late 1950s that she continued to make appearances on variety shows, some which were successful and some which were not. She was very excited and happy to have the opportunity to appear on the *Dinah Shore Chevy Show* on November 2, 1956. This was only the second episode of the Dinah Shore's newest television offering. Since 1951, Shore had a fifteen-minute live musical program, *The Dinah Shore Show* which aired two times a week. Shore was a spokeswoman for Chevrolet. In 1956, she began a new venture, an hour-long variety musical program which featured the celebrities of the day performing and appearing in skits. *The Dinah Shore Chevy Show* premiered in October 1956 as a monthly special which it remained for a year until it was added as a weekly program.<sup>147</sup> Hildegarde's celebrity status in this time period was apparent even though she worried constantly about being a "has-been." The fact that the show's producers and evidently Dinah Shore picked Hildegarde to appear on their second episode of a brand new series when ratings and viewers were most highly sought speaks volumes as does the celebrity status of those with whom Hildegarde appeared. The premier episode the month before featured Frank

Sinatra, movie star Betty Hutton, and sportscaster and pitching great Dizzy Dean. Appearing with Hildegard the next month was Hal March, the host of *The \$64,000 Question*, and movie star Betty Grable. For Hildegard, the show was a success from her arrival in Los Angeles to the show time. Everyone including Dinah Shore treated her very well. Hildegard felt honored working with such professionals.<sup>148</sup> She was particularly pleased at the compliments she received and that Shore, ten years her junior, “raved about my skin texture.”<sup>149</sup>

Her bad experience in 1955 did not stop her from attempting a television career. She continued to appear on variety shows. In 1957, she was slated to perform on the Ed Sullivan Show. She appeared on October 20, 1957, but it was not a good experience for her. Hildegard attended a rehearsal during which she was scheduled to do two pieces; between songs she was expected to talk and joke as she did in her regular show. Hildegard rehearsed with the orchestra and told some jokes, one of which Ed Sullivan request she cut. According to Hildegard, Sullivan during the rehearsal was cordial but apparently not friendly. This was not the first time Hildegard had met Sullivan and apparently she expected a better introduction than he gave her as she noted, “he didn’t announce me nicely.”<sup>150</sup> Hildegard opened with “Around the World” and then proceeded to perform “Wunderbar”—except there was no orchestral music playing with her. After the show was over she was informed that “Wunderbar” was cut from the program and the music removed from the orchestra’s music books, but no one had informed Hildegard before she went on the air. She was horrified and shocked. It is without doubt that if Anna had been there, this sort of mishap would never had happened.

Hildegarde and Anna stopped working together in 1955, but because of the animosity between the two instead of splitting amicably Anna and Hildegarde fought each other. The fighting caused a delay in their separation which meant their business relationship did not officially dissolve until December 15, 1956. Hildegarde and Anna lived in an apartment in Manhattan which had fourteen rooms and which was full of the memories and art they had collected since they first began living together in 1931. Twenty-five years of their relationship could not be divided, fairly in their opinion so they named their union, “The Firm of Hildegarde and Anna Sosenko.” In this way the material possessions they owned were divided and slated for public sale. On December 15, all of the contents of their large apartment was auctioned, including their vast and valuable art collection. It was something Anna did not want to happen. She called Hildegarde, crying and saying an auction was not a proper way to separate their belongings. According to Hildegarde in her diaries, Anna resented having to purchase her own belongings at an auction. Obviously, the auction was pushed through by Hildegarde. Throughout the breakup, she blamed Anna for insisting on having everything her way; yet it is clear Hildegarde also wanted the same thing. The auction was advertised and made a private situation into a public occasion with invitations for anyone interested to come view the materials and then to bid on “All the Properties of the Firm of Hildegarde and Anna Sosenko.”<sup>151</sup> The advertisement for the sale listed nearly everything the women owned. Hildegarde was not in New York City when the auction was being planned, nor when it occurred. Her attorney kept her updated about Anna’s actions. He said at one point that Anna tried to take some of the paintings and that on the

day of the auction, Anna tried, to no avail, to purchase Hildegarde's bedroom set for \$2000.<sup>152</sup>

It was a tragic and sad ending to their union. Hildegarde, disgruntled and angry, wanted to auction off their possessions simply to hurt Anna. Perhaps she felt it was the way she could finally retaliate for all of the years of abuse she suffered with Anna. The fact was that in spite of the fighting and abuse which occurred with both parties, Anna gave Hildegarde the one thing she in life she wanted: fame. Although Anna's personality was harsh and her interactions with supper-club owners, other managers, bands, and orchestras were notorious because of her insistence that everything met her standards, it is clear Anna's methods worked in the end for Hildegarde. Again, it is hard to imagine that the scene which occurred with Ed Sullivan would ever have happened on Anna's watch. The relationship/partnership breaking up in such a formal way, by naming it "The Firm of Hildegarde and Anna Sosenko" meant their union was defined as strictly business. In a way, identifying their relationship as a business was an attempt to negate the fact they were both publically and privately perceived as a couple. When articles appeared in newspapers and magazines titled, "Hildegarde's Best Man: He's a gal named Anna" or when an entertainment columnist claimed he would owe Anna a cigar if Hildegarde's popularity went any higher in 1945, there was no doubt what innuendos were being made.<sup>153</sup> Offering Anna a cigar and calling her Hildegarde's "Best Man" sent clear messages to the public. It was something Hildegarde most likely wanted to escape. The split was detrimental for both Anna and Hildegarde. Anna had a difficult time finding her place in entertainment without the superstar she had created; she felt that her

invention walked off with all of the product and left her without a career. But without Anna, Hildegard was not able to sustain the career as it had been.

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<sup>1</sup> Art Spooner, "The Show Must Go On," *The Pointer*, February 9, 1951, No. 11. Scrapbook 23, Hildegard (Loretta Sell) Papers, Marquette University, Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Milwaukee, Wisconsin (hereafter cited as HLS Papers, MU).

<sup>2</sup> Cover, *Billboard*, June 15, 1945; "Crosby and Hildegard Lead Tab" *Billboard*, May 12, 1945, 17, 21.

<sup>3</sup> John Maynard, "A Very Shy Lady With A Trick Bodice," *Herald American*, Chicago Illinois, March 30, 1946, Hildegard Sell Collection, Billy Rose Theater Collection, New York Public Library, New York City, New York ( hereafter cited as HSC BRTC NYPL); "Hildegard, Inc." Volume 26, *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> "What America's Youngest Network is Doing About Television" *Billboard*, May 12, 1945, 6-7.

<sup>5</sup> Diaries, October 18, 1943.

<sup>6</sup> "Ratings" The Museum of Broadcast Communications, <http://www.museum.tv/eotvsection.php?entrycode=ratings>.

<sup>7</sup> Susan J. Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2004), 158-159.

<sup>8</sup> For an example of Dinah Shore before she transformed see advertisement proclaiming her as "The Nation's Favorite Songstress" in *Billboard*, September 28, 1940, p. 21. Lola Clare Bratten provides an in depth analysis of Dinah Shore's image as a "good girl" and wrote extensively about the "diminishment" of her ethnicity in her chapter, "Nothin' Could Be Finah: The Dinah Shore Chevy Show" which appeared in *Small Screens, Big Ideas: Television in the 1950s*, ed. Janet Thumim (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> *Billboard*, April 7, 1945.

<sup>10</sup> *Billboard*, June 16, 1945.

<sup>11</sup> Victoria Sherrow, *For Appearance's Sake: The Historical Encyclopedia of Good Looks, Beauty, and Grooming* (Westport: Oryx Press, 2001), 225.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*; Faith Popcorn and Lys Marigold, *EVEolution: The Eight Truths of Marketing to Women* (New York: Hyperion, 2000), 221-222.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Advertisement, Volume 22, HSC BRTC NYPL.

<sup>15</sup> Advertisement for Namm's, *New York Post*, March 13, 1946, Volume 23, *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Advertisement, *St Cloud Times*, February 4, 1946, Volume 22, *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Diaries, September 9, 1945; Advertisement, "Hildegard Rose," Scrapbook 12, HLS Papers, MU.

<sup>18</sup> Diaries, October 2, 1945.

<sup>19</sup> Diaries, December 13, 1945.

<sup>20</sup> Diaries, January 28, 1946.

<sup>21</sup> Diaries, March 9, 1946.

<sup>22</sup> Hildegard expressed her feelings in her diary from this day as well as on the public apology from the Hecht Company which is in "Scrapbook Loose Leaves," Envelope, HSC BRTC NYPL.

<sup>23</sup> For examples of advertisements for "Ultra Violets" see: *Life*, September 30, 1946.

<sup>24</sup> An article with this information by Rosellen Callahan circulated around the country with varying titles on the story. For example, see: "Hope and Hildegard Rated Radio Tops" *News*, Mt Vernon, Ohio, December 19, 1944; "Hope, Hildegard, Sinatra Lead Air Parade" *Post*, Cincinnati, Ohio, December



18, 1944; "Radio Stars Watch Listener Rating as Guides" *Enquirer & News*, Battle Creek, Michigan, December 24, 1944, Volume 15, HSC BRTC NYPL.

<sup>25</sup> Information about The Penguin Room is available in Folder, "Penguin Room, Scripts, revisions, pages, 1946, April-July, n.d.," Box 16, Joseph Stein Papers, 1942-1969, Wisconsin Historical Society/ Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, Madison, Wisconsin (hereafter referred to as WHS).

<sup>26</sup> Material about the Campbell Room is found in Folder, "Campbell Room Scripts, Revisions, 1946, Oct. – 1947 Mar.," Box 17, Joseph Stein Papers, 1942-1969, WHS.

<sup>27</sup> Jack Gould, "Listener's Notebook: Singer from Milwaukee and Theater Critics" *New York Times*, November 3, 1946.

<sup>28</sup> Diaries, December 1-10, 1946.

<sup>29</sup> Diaries, December 1946.

<sup>30</sup> "Hildegard Show Threatened By Singer's Illness" *Billboard*, December 14, 1946, 5.

<sup>31</sup> Jodi O'Brien, *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society Volume 1* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2009), 447.

<sup>32</sup> Randi Hutter Epstein, "Emotions, Fertility, and the 1940s Woman," *Journal of Public Health Policy* Vol. 24 No 2 (2003): 197. JSTOR, accessed October, 13, 2010. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3343513>.

<sup>33</sup> For examples of Hildegard's pains leading up to her surgery, see Diaries, June 23-24, 1945.

<sup>34</sup> For example see, Diaries, August 2, 1946.

<sup>35</sup> Diaries, August 18, 1930.

<sup>36</sup> Diane Negra, "Re-Made for Television: Hedy Lamarr's Post-War Star Textuality" in *Small Screens, Big Ideas: Television in the 1950s*, ed. Janet Thumim (New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2002), 105-117.

<sup>37</sup> Bratten, 88-104.

<sup>38</sup> Vicki Baum, "The Long Denial" *Collier's*, June 1, 1946, 12.

<sup>39</sup> Information about Vicki Baum is available through several sources, most notably her memoirs, Vicki Baum, *It Was All Quite Different: The Memoirs of Vicki Dunn* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, Inc., 1964). See also a new biography of her, Nicole Nottelman, *Die Karrieren der Vicki Baum* (Cologne, Germany: Kiepenheuer & Witsch GmbH, 2007) and Joey Horsley, "Vicki Baum" FemBio website, [www.fembio.org](http://www.fembio.org).

<sup>40</sup> Doris Lockerman, "Let's See Now...Hildegard, Anna Complete Cooperation" *Atlanta Constitution*, October 22, 1947, Volume 27, HSC BRTC NYPL.

<sup>41</sup> Information about George Frazier is available through the numerous obituaries published when he died. Examples can be found in *Boston Globe*, June 16, 1974; *New York Times*, June 15, 1974; *Los Angeles Times*, June 14, 1974. There was also a biography published about his life: Charles Fountain, *Another Man's Poison: The Life and Writing of Columnist George Frazier* (Chester, Connecticut: Globe Pequot Press, 1984).

<sup>42</sup> George Frazier, *The One With The Mustache is Costello* (New York: Random House, 1947), 71.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 72.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 73-74.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 72.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 78.

<sup>50</sup> Russell Maloney, "Entertainment Editor: The One With the Mustache is Costello" *New York Times*, September 21, 1947. Also available in "New York Times Book Review," September 21, 1947, Volume 35, HSC BRTC NYPL.

<sup>51</sup> Dr. Morris Fishbein to Anna Sosenko, October 4, 1947, Box 8, Folder 1, Morris Fishbein Papers, Special Collections Research Center, the University of Chicago Library, Chicago, Illinois (hereafter referred to as MFP UC).

<sup>52</sup> Anna Sosenko to Dr. Morris Fishbein, October 7, 1947, Box 8 Folder 1, MFP UC.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Part of this story is available in the collection book put out by the Associated American Artists Galleries which accompanied the Hildegard Sosenko collection as it was shown in associated galleries. The book and several of Anna's detailed lists of their paintings, their purchase price, and values are in the Anna Sosenko Papers Collection, the unprocessed collection at Randolph Macon College in Lynchburg, Virginia (hereafter cited as ASP RMC).

<sup>55</sup> Examples are: Robert L. Parsons, executive Director of Associated American Artists, to Anna Sosenko, July 30, 1936; list of paintings titled: Pictures Loaned to Farleigh Dickenson, Rutherford, N.J. for College Ceremonies September 15, 1949; Guide to Be Used to the Exhibition of the Sosenko-Hildegard collection for the Benefit of the Art Department of Bronxville Women's Club, all found in ASP RMC.

<sup>56</sup> Virginia Leimert, "Yes Virginia, There Really Is A Hildegard!: And It's No Wonder She Feels Incomparable All the Time" *Chicago Daily News*, May 18, 1948, Volume 30, HSC BRTC NYPL.

<sup>57</sup> Mildred Stockard, "Sparkling is the Word: Hildegard a Favorite on Two Continents, Is Also Proud of Her Sister in Houston" *Texas Chronicle*, February 23, 1947, Volume 26, HSC BRTC NYPL.

<sup>58</sup> "Imitating the Inimitable" *Liberty*, February 1947, New York City, Volume 26, HSC BRTC NYPL.

<sup>59</sup> Examples of articles showing Hildegard with celebrities "doing" her include Burgess Meredith in Mildred Stockard, "Sparkling is the Word: Hildegard a Favorite on Two Continents, Is Also Proud of her Sister in Houston" *Texas Chronicle*, February 23, 1947 and Tallulah Bankhead in an advertisement for the Campbell Room, *Capital*, Topeka, Kansas, March 23, 1947, Volume 26, HSC BRTC NYPL.

<sup>60</sup> Diaries, June 16, 18, 1945.

<sup>61</sup> Diaries, April 21, 1946.

<sup>62</sup> Victor Moore was a beloved actor and comedian who moved from silent films to talkies and was also well known on Broadway. Some of Moore's films include the Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers movie *Swing Time*, *Ziegfeld Follies*, *Louisiana Purchase* (with Bob Hope), and eventually in 1955's *Seven Year Itch*.

<sup>63</sup> Diaries, April 3, 1947.

<sup>64</sup> Information about the tournament and attendees is taken from a series of newspaper articles which appeared on May 17 and 18, 1947 in the *Washington Post*. The articles are available in Volume 26, HSC BRTC NYPL.

<sup>65</sup> Shirley Povich, "This Morning, with Shirley Povich" *Washington Post*, May 18, 1947, *ibid*.

<sup>66</sup> "The Nation's Bigwigs Let Their Hair Down" *Washington Post*, May 18, 1947, *ibid*.

<sup>67</sup> Diaries, August 26, 1945.

<sup>68</sup> Diaries, August 31, 1944.

<sup>69</sup> Diaries, January 3, 1945.

<sup>70</sup> Diaries, August 9, 1947.

<sup>71</sup> The biographical information about Dr. Chung comes from Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, *Doctor Mom Chung of the Fair-Haired Bastards: The Life of a Wartime Celebrity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

<sup>75</sup> Diaries, September 4, 1947.

<sup>76</sup> Diaries, September 9, 1947.

<sup>77</sup> Diaries, September 12, 1947.

<sup>78</sup> Diaries, September 13, 1947.

<sup>79</sup> Freddy Francisco, "Freddie Francisco Observes: Mom Chung Stages a Farewell Party Before Hildegard Bestows Last Rose" Unnamed newspaper, Scrapbook 12, HLS Papers, MU.

<sup>80</sup> "Hildegard Is Ill: Must Stay Aged for Some Time" *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 18, 1948; "Hildegard Ill in Rome" *The Washington Post*, August 18, 1948. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>81</sup> The details about Hildegard's illness, and the concerns Anna and Hildegard had about the public perception come from: Anna Sosenko to Dr. Morris Fishbein, August 17, 1948, MFP UC. Information about her making the performance in London is from: "'Chanteuse from Plaza' Hildegard En Route Here" *Milwaukee Journal* September 16, 1948. Google News Archives.

<sup>82</sup> Robert D. McCracken, *Las Vegas: The Great American Playground* (Reno: University of Las Vegas Press, 1996), 64.

- <sup>83</sup> Ibid, 53-54.
- <sup>84</sup> Several advertisements and articles about her appearance at the Thunderbird Hotel are in Volume 32, HSC BRTC NYPL.
- <sup>85</sup> Jack Cortez, "Howdy Podner" *Boulder City News*, December 30, 1948, Volume 32, HSC BRTC NYPL.
- <sup>86</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>87</sup> "Hildegarde to Open First Texas Show Here: Singer Will Bring Own Orchestra for Three Weeks at Shamrock" *Houston Chronicle*, June 8, 1948, Scrapbook 33, HSC BRTC NYPL.
- <sup>88</sup> "Triple-Threat Hildegarde Throws Houston an Entertainment Strike" *The Houston Press*, June 24, 1949, Volume 34, *ibid.*
- <sup>89</sup> Charlie Evans, "Houston Falls in Love With Hildegarde: 'The Incomparable' is Equally 'Wowed' by Reception at Emerald Room" *The Houston Chronicle*, June 24, 1949., Volume 34, *ibid.*
- <sup>90</sup> Virginia Drake, "Two Huge Trunks Pack a Lot of Glamour for Effervescent Artist: Hildegarde's Wardrobe Is Incomparable Too" unnamed newspaper, Volume 34, *ibid.*
- <sup>91</sup> *Variety*, July 26, 1949, 56, Volume 34, *ibid.*
- <sup>92</sup> For example see: Anna Ristori, "Le Maruice Chevalier Feminin (et Americain) Veut Conquerir Paris," *Paris-Presse*, April 22, 1950, and "Hildegarde Vous Dira: 'Je vous Aime' en Huit Langues" *Images du Monde*, June 1, 1950, Volume 38, *ibid.*
- <sup>93</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>94</sup> "Music: Deep or Not," *Time*, November 27, 1950, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,813876,00.html>.
- <sup>95</sup> Advertisement, *Variety*, December 5, 1951, 38-39, Scrapbook 17, HLS Papers, MU.
- <sup>96</sup> The information for Hildegarde's affiliation with Mack Trucks comes from an advertisement titled "In the Spotlight: Mack Co-Stars with Famous Entertainers" in Scrapbook 17, HLS Papers, MU.
- <sup>97</sup> "Mgr. Ructions Prompt Hildy's Switch to WM" *Billboard*, September 24, 1949, p. 44.
- <sup>98</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>99</sup> "Hildegarde Agents Fired Over \$1,000" *Milwaukee Sentinel*, September 8, 1949. Google News Archive.
- <sup>100</sup> Diaries, October 3, 1950.
- <sup>101</sup> Diaries, December 9, 1950.
- <sup>102</sup> Diaries, October 8, 1950.
- <sup>103</sup> Diaries, November 4 -20, 1952.
- <sup>104</sup> Diaries, August 29, 1950.
- <sup>105</sup> Diaries, November 20, 1952.
- <sup>106</sup> Diaries, November 1952.
- <sup>107</sup> Lew Diamond to Hildegarde and Anna Sosenko, March 24, 1943, Folder 1, Box 1, HSC BRTC NYPL.
- <sup>108</sup> Salvatore to Anna Sosenko, Thursday no date, ASP RMC. The letter was from the early 1950s and was kept with other letters from the same era.
- <sup>109</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>110</sup> Diaries, September 6, 1938.
- <sup>111</sup> Ida Sell to Hildegarde, February 21, 1951, Folder 3, Box 12, HLS Papers, MU.
- <sup>112</sup> Ida Sell to Hildegarde, February 21, 1951, Folder 3, Box 12, HLS Papers, MU; Ida Sell to Hildegarde, labeled 25/51, Folder 3, Box, 12, HLS Papers, MU.
- <sup>113</sup> Ida Sell to Hildegarde, labeled 25/52, *Ibid.*
- <sup>114</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>115</sup> This information is found in three letters from Fritzi Frieder to Hildegarde, Folder 8, Box 12. HLS Papers, MU.
- <sup>116</sup> Diaries, April 5, 1954.
- <sup>117</sup> Dr. Irving Margulies to Hildegarde, Folder 7, Box 12, HLS Papers MU.
- <sup>118</sup> Anna Sosenko to Hildegarde, September 10, 1953, Folder 9, Box 12. HLS Papers MU. This letter does not bear Anna's name but is from Anna and on Hotel Nicolle stationery.
- <sup>119</sup> Anna Sosenko to Hildegarde, April 23, 1953 ASP RMC.
- <sup>120</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>121</sup> Ibid.

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- <sup>122</sup> Anna Sosenko to Hildegard, no date, *ibid*.
- <sup>123</sup> Diaries, May 6, 1954.
- <sup>124</sup> Diaries, May 3, 1954.
- <sup>125</sup> Diaries, April 22, 1954.
- <sup>126</sup> Janet Kern, "Hildegard Fluffs 'Person' Debut" *Chicago American*, May 11, 1954.
- <sup>127</sup> Hildegard to Anna Sosenko, May 14, 1954, ASP RMC.
- <sup>128</sup> Anna Sosenko to Hildegard, February 1, 1954, *ibid*.
- <sup>129</sup> Hildegard to Anna Sosenko, August 5, no year; Hildegard to Anna Sosenko, December 20, 1953, *ibid*.
- <sup>130</sup> Hildegard to Anna Sosenko, no date on Hotel Statler stationary, *ibid*.
- <sup>131</sup> Anna Sosenko to Hildegard, September 10, 1953, Folder 9 Box 12, HLS Papers, MU.
- <sup>132</sup> Anna Sosenko to Hildegard, undated letter, ASP RMC.
- <sup>133</sup> John R. Vile, *Great American Lawyers: An Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2001), 41.
- <sup>134</sup> The letters between Anna Sosenko and Fanny Holtzmann are located in: Folder 4, Box, 9, Fanny E. Holtzmann Papers, The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati Campus, Hebrew Union College, Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati Ohio (hereafter cited as FH Papers, AJA) .
- <sup>135</sup> Anna Sosenko to Fanny Holtzmann, January 17, 1953, Folder 4, Box, 9, FH Papers, AJA.
- <sup>136</sup> Anna Sosenko to Fanny Holtzmann, May 31, 1952, *ibid*.
- <sup>137</sup> Diaries, January 25, 1955.
- <sup>138</sup> Evidence of this is found throughout much Hildegard's diary from 1955. For specific examples, see: Diaries, January 16, 1955; February 25, 1955; May 18, 1955; June 2, 1955.
- <sup>139</sup> For example, see: Diaries, April 23, 1955
- <sup>140</sup> The article by Drew Pearson titled, "Washington Merry-Go-Round," appeared in newspapers across the country.
- <sup>141</sup> "THE SENATE: The man Behind the Frown," *Time*, May 27, 1957, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,824864-8,00.html> .
- <sup>142</sup> Diaries, January 24, 1955.
- <sup>143</sup> George M. Frank, "What Happened When...HILDEGARDE Cooed to the SENATOR: Darling, Je Vous Aime Beaucoup...," *Hush Hush*, July 1955, HLS Papers, MU.
- <sup>144</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>145</sup> Diaries, May 5, 1955.
- <sup>146</sup> Diaries, June 28, 1955.
- <sup>147</sup> Ronald Wayne Rodman, *Tuning In: American Narrative Television Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 184; Ken Bloom, *The American Songbook: The Singer, The Songwriters, and the Songs* (New York: Black Dog and Levanthal Publishers, 2005), 100.
- <sup>148</sup> Hildegard arrived in LA for rehearsals and filming of the show on October 24, 1956. She documented her experiences with the cast and crew in her diaries from then until the show went on the air.
- <sup>149</sup> Diaries, November 2, 1956.
- <sup>150</sup> Diaries, October 20, 1957.
- <sup>151</sup> Advertisement, *New York Times*, December 9, 1956. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
- <sup>152</sup> Diaries, December 17, 1956.
- <sup>153</sup> Louis Sobol, "Hildegard's Best Man: He's a Gal Named Anna, Who Pulls the Strings that Animate a Noted Night-Life Star, Just as Many Another Big Name Has a Dynamic Shadow" *Journal American*, October 29, 1949 , Scrapbook 35, HSC BRTC NYPL; Richard K. Bellamy, "Riding the Airwaves: Jots and Tittles with a Radio Slant" *Milwaukee Journal*, November 2, 1944, Scrapbook 16, HSC BRTC NYPL.

## Chapter Five

### Over 50—So What!

It was almost as if she were playing an old woman but wasn't accustomed to the role.<sup>1</sup>

In 1963, the Incomparable Hildegard published her autobiography titled, *Over 50—So What!*. The book was marketed as part biography and part self-help, replete with tips on exercise, diet, and positive thinking. The jacket promised it was “A Book about Physical, Mental, and Spiritual Health—Grooming, Poise, Diet.” Hildegard had a great deal to offer in these areas: she was indeed over 50, still entertaining around the world in supper clubs and night clubs, and looked relatively unchanged over the passage of twenty-five years in the national spotlight. The book was co-authored by Adel Whiteley Fletcher, a well known entertainment columnist and editor.<sup>2</sup> It is clear that while Fletcher helped Hildegard, much of the writing came directly from Hildegard as it matches the writing style in her personal diaries. When her book was published, Hildegard was actually closer to sixty than fifty and was no longer as famous as during her heyday of the 1940s and 1950s. The book drifts from a narrative to advice, using life experiences as instructional tools on everything from shyness to eating habits. The autobiography contained information about the author's formative years in Milwaukee and portrayed her life as a rags-to-riches story. According to Hildegard, her progress from a humble beginning as a poor grocer's daughter to an entertainer dubbed by Eleanor Roosevelt as “Queen of the Supper Clubs” involved ridding herself of the stigma and anger which accompanied her poor childhood. Celebrity autobiographies and biographies often

portray their subjects as overcoming great odds to attain their star status and Hildegarde's was no different.

This was Hildegarde's last stand as a popular celebrity. *Over 50—So What!* delivered exactly what the book jacket promised, life lessons from a glamorous star of a bygone era. The book never had great sales or broke any records, as had the author herself twenty-years previous. It did however, provide Hildegarde one more opportunity to enter the public domain when it was something sold at events and concerts where she appeared or performed. For a nominal fee, the aging "cult of Hildegarde" could purchase the book and hope to have it autographed after the show, then take it home and look for any juicy tidbits she might have offered up in her life story. The autobiography was far from a "tell-all" about celebrity class and culture. Hildegarde certainly had many stories and scandals which she could have recounted, yet chose to focus on her own story. She presented a fanciful account of her career based more on the story Anna created and sold to the press years before rather than the truth of her background. The book's story became part of the lore of Hildegarde which in turn was repeated in articles and in her obituaries even though it veered slightly from reality. In the cultural atmosphere of the early 1960s, Hildegarde probably felt she was separated somewhat from the reality of the rapidly changing culture around her. This is not to say she stopped trying to innovate and stay current enough to work, but by the 1960s her star was fading fast, and after Anna, none of her management team kept her name in the papers or promoted her with the same vigor. And so she started to slip from the intense spotlight she enjoyed in the 1940s.

Between the publication of her autobiography in 1963 and the end of her professional career in 1995, the world of entertainment and music changed drastically.

Serving as a reflection of the culture it at once represented and influenced, the entertainment industry in 1963 was nothing like it had been during Hildegarde's reign and nothing like it would be by the mid-1990s. Television was one of the primary forms of entertainment. By 1963, even Lucille Ball was into her third television series. Rock and roll not only changed the music scene but by the early 1960s even the genre of rock was undergoing a wide ranging transformation. By late 1963, the plan for the British invasion was well underway. Elvis was an icon, had been drafted, and was already well into his movie career. All of this was far from Hildegarde's performance style and genre. Her contemporaries included members of the Rat Pack like Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin, and other performers like Perry Como and Liberace. Most of these performers worked their magic in Las Vegas and became synonymous with the Strip. They embodied a distinct lifestyle, based in the Café Society of the 1930s and 1940s, but was different in that these entertainers now sold a more decadent lifestyle centered on what is called "partying" in the modern vernacular. They essentially glorified alcoholism and a life where women seemingly appeared only as accoutrements to their male companions. Women provided not only a proof of the Rat Pack's masculinity but appeared almost like an inside joke within the male community in which she existed. This new lifestyle embodied by Las Vegas and modern night-clubs contained remnants of the elegance of an earlier urban nightlife, but a great deal had changed since Hildegarde's heyday.

By the time her autobiography debuted, Hildegarde was more actively engaged in the Catholic Church than ever. She was always a practicing Catholic, but by the early 1960s she spent time nearly every day in church praying the rosary or attending Mass. This eventually translated into Hildegarde reportedly becoming a Carmelite Third Order,

meaning she adhered as a lay person to Carmelite ideals such as chastity, but remained in the worldly realm rather than living in a religious community.<sup>3</sup> This level of religiosity set Hildegarde apart from others in the entertainment field. Her Catholicism was always part of her public persona and she thought of herself as devout. In reality she had always made choices which were not in keeping with Catholic traditions. When she was younger, it seemed she used her own interpretation of Catholic spirituality to guide her life. Examples of this included her participating in séances, reading *The Well of Loneliness*, and forsaking marriage and children for a career—and Anna. Starting in the late 1950s, Hildegarde began to distance herself from her former single/childless life. She began giving interviews in which she incorporated the story of three serious relationships with men and at least a few times lamented about not being married. By the time her career began to fade, Hildegarde for the first time became apologetic about being single, though it certainly would have rung hollow with those who knew her and is not supported in her diaries. In later life, Hildegarde's Catholicism became more prominent in her publicity and her desire to share the faith was evidence of the chasm which separated her from her contemporaries.

Hildegarde had an obvious disconnect from the changing world around her. The year Hildegarde's autobiography was published, another book came out which started second wave feminism. Betty Friedan's seminal work, *The Feminine Mystique*, was published in 1963. Hildegarde did not make any pretenses about her own book being anything but her story and a guide for women's health and beauty. It was in some ways antithetical to much of what Friedan established in her work. Hildegarde encouraged women who were no longer considered in their prime to stay active and fit, and



maintained that women over fifty-years old could remain vital. This was much different than the contemporary view of older women. Looking young and youthful was the way to stay attractive and this was reinforced by the advertising campaigns of cosmetic companies.<sup>4</sup> While Hildegard was advocating something nearly groundbreaking, she packaged it in terms which enforced stereotypical views of women so deeply entrenched in American culture. The very thing against which *The Feminine Mystique* railed, including the pressures of cultural expectations upon women, was in many ways what Hildegard advocated when she suggested her methods for women to stay attractive and pretty.

The era which encapsulated the waning of Hildegard's career lasted from the mid-1950s until her final stage appearance. Those forty-five years are some of the most tumultuous for American culture and society. American values swung from the pressure of conformity in the 1950s to the Civil Rights movements to the fight against war in Vietnam and then to "no-fight" at all as Americans settled into the general malaise of the 1970s.<sup>5</sup> Americans saw overwhelming youth movements starting with the beatniks turning into the hippies coupled with a new African American cultural movement which embraced Black Power and "black is beautiful."<sup>6</sup> Politically, the U.S. went from a war hero in Eisenhower to Camelot with John and Jackie Kennedy to the disgrace of impeachment with Nixon. Soon, this was followed by the Iranian hostage crisis which had long ranging and devastating consequences for American foreign policy. Then in the 1980s, American life once again became dominated by a new conservatism which greatly affected America socially, culturally, and politically as Americans dealt with the new frightening plague of AIDS. All the while, youth culture traversed through disco, punk,

new wave, and rap music. Yet somehow, throughout all of this true upheaval, Hildgarde maintained a belief that she was destined to be a great star again. Her detachment with the realities of life surrounding her in the United States was as strong as her misperception of her celebrity status.

### **Hildgarde's "General Malaise"**

After Hildgarde and Anna split in 1956, Hildgarde's career changed yet again. She continued through the late 1950s to be popular, but her popularity was different than in the 1940s. Although not considered old by any standard, her act was no longer the top audience draw as it was a few years before. By the late 1950s, people had a wide variety of music from which to choose. The radio had changed greatly since Hildgarde's era. It became dominated by disc jockeys who played actual recordings that the listeners could then purchase to play at home. Alan Freed, the first disc jockey to break new ground in radio broadcasting, set a standard which others followed. By the late 1950s and early 1960s, radio stations offered listeners a cross section of music from Hank Williams and Kitty Wells to Elvis and Dean Martin. Hildgarde was not part of the new music playing on the radio. In spite of this, news articles promised Hildgarde was "still" the enchanting singer she had always been. During the late 1950s, Hildgarde continued to perform in the same venues to which she was accustomed. Articles still appeared about her regularly in newspapers across the nation but now she added television appearances to her repertoire.

Hildgarde was clearly experimenting with keeping her act new and had been doing this since the time of her separation from Anna. One example of this occurred in

1954 with Hildegard's return to Las Vegas. Hildegard was known for wearing full length formal evening gowns. For her show in the Painted Desert Room at Wilbur Clark's Desert Inn, Hildegard appeared in what looked almost like a show-girl outfit. Her outfit looked very similar to a one-piece bathing suit, with a strapless bustier top and the bottom which ended at the highest point on her thighs and finished with fishnet stockings. As per usual, she was wearing her full length formal gloves. Photographs of Hildegard in this outfit appeared in more than seventy newspapers across the United States. Each photo was accompanied by a short article discussing Hildegard's "Big Change."<sup>7</sup> This latest attempt looked awkward and out of place in relation to her earlier attire. A few years after this, she attempted to break into stage acting by accepting a role in a summer stock production of *Can-Can*.<sup>8</sup> She struggled with remembering the lyrics to the songs and had to be prompted during many of her performances.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, it was Hildegard's debut into theater but was not something which she would pursue as a new career path.

Her travels in the late 1950s opened up some new markets that Hildegard rarely tapped until this time period. An excellent example of this was the Swan Room at the Hotel Monteleone in New Orleans. In the "City That Care Forgot," the city where music was and is celebrated daily, the Swan Room embodied the old glamour of a bygone era. This venue maintained the old style night-club atmosphere to which Hildegard was accustomed. It had just re-opened before Hildegard appeared in February 1958. She played two weeks and was so well received she booked the room again the next year. In April 1959, Hildegard returned with great fanfare and enjoyed two additional weeks of southern hospitality. During that time she appeared on local radio shows and at famous

places like Brennan's Restaurant where the elite in town gathered. The Swan Room was an important part of the hotel and had opened after an extensive renovation of the hotel in 1954. The hotel and its night-club were one of the most luxurious in the South and frequented by such notables as Truman Capote and Tennessee Williams. Hildegard's audience in New Orleans was receptive to her and she was declared by at least one reporter in 1959 as the best entertainer who had been there in the last year.<sup>10</sup>

The press presented Hildegard's in a good light and her stay in New Orleans harkened back to her heyday. Yet it did not belie the reality of Hildegard's career at that point. While in New Orleans enjoying the benefits of the upper-crust patrons of her music, at home her manager Bill could not get her a solid booking for the weeks following New Orleans. This became the pattern for the 1960s. Yet Hildegard's press was good and commentators gave her favorable reviews, often gushing about her youthful appearance and stage show. Privately, behind closed doors, the performances no longer sold out every night and bookings became problematic. Hildegard acknowledged publically that the main difference between her current situation and the days gone by was attendance at the clubs and theaters. Her explanation for this lack of an audience was due to television usurping the need to go out for entertainment.<sup>11</sup>

Hildegard was partially correct America was spending more and more time in front to their television sets eating dinner than dressing in formal evening attire and going out for an expensive dinner, drinks, and a show.<sup>12</sup> Even the movie industry (a casual activity which did not require dressing appropriately or paying for the cost of the required cover charge, drink minimums, or dinner) suffered due to television.<sup>13</sup> The changing nature of American culture, including the increasing interest in casual activities, was a partial death

for swanky formal night-clubs in expensive hotels. Yes, Hildegard could continue to draw crowds in places like New Orleans or resorts in the Caribbean, but even in these venues, the rooms did not always fill and her salary was compromised because of the dying interest in the cabaret. She complained of what she called “imported chantoosies who sing in sweatshirts and sneakers” as contributing factors in the changing tastes of the American public and blamed the performers, including Edith Piaf, for “bamboozling the American public.”<sup>14</sup> Her obvious jibe at fellow performers was clear: according to her, many of them contributed to the problem rather than upholding standards and expectations. According to Hildegard, performers should lead by example.

On the cusp of a new decade, Hildegard found herself as an audience member at the Persian Room of the Plaza Hotel instead of in the spotlight at the microphone. When in New York, she lived at the Plaza, continuing on a nomadic path she began years before on the vaudeville stage. Rather than having the same living arrangement as when she lived there with Anna, she returned to a different room every time she came home from travelling. It was as if she was trying to retain a hold on the not-so-distant past even though clearly she was no longer part of the hip scene of New York night life. It made sense that maintaining an apartment in New York City when most of the year was spent on the road was not a feasible or reasonable expense, but there were certainly less expensive hotels available for residential stays within Manhattan. None provided the glamour and connection to her past as did the Plaza which remains one of the most exclusive addresses in the city. By this time, she was travelling less and yet refused to establish a permanent residence in the city. Although she clung to her heyday, her life was drastically different than it had been. Now instead of demanding and getting a large

salary and a percentage cut of the take of the room, she was lucky to get \$3000 pay for six days of work, as revealed in her contract in Miami, the next engagement after her New Orleans contract.<sup>15</sup> Hildegardie relied financially on yearly payments from insurance annuities instead of chic engagements at the high class night-clubs.<sup>16</sup>

Slowly over the years, her brand of performing in a cabaret became passé, and by 1960 under the tutelage of an indifferent manager, Hildegardie encountered problems she had never faced in her years as a celebrity. At the end of 1959 and beginning of 1960, while travelling on tour in California, Hildegardie's career hit a low point. She flew into Los Angeles from Florida and performed on local television shows. She conducted numerous interviews before her scheduled performance in Santa Monica for New Year's Eve. Before the visit, her old friend from vaudeville with whom she performed, Dora Early, asked to borrow \$1500 from Hildegardie. Hildegardie was sad that she could only give her \$750.<sup>17</sup>

Giving this amount of money to her friend was not a wise move in light of the financial problems with this particular tour. Hildegardie had heard before she left for Santa Monica that there were problems pre-selling tickets for the show. Once she and her entourage arrived, two of the musicians sat down with her and told her they no longer wanted to continue on the tour. The tickets sales were not profitable enough for them to stay and so the New Year's performance would be their last. At the show, only two-hundred people showed up.<sup>18</sup> Hildegardie had them all come close to the stage and performed for a receptive audience. By the first day of 1961 when Hildegardie returned to Los Angeles, numerous people including some friends put pressure on her to cancel the remainder of the tour dates and tell the press it was due to illness—which she did.<sup>19</sup>

Hildegarde hated pretending to be too sick to go on, but all parties involved agreed that this was the best idea. The problem was that her management company refused to pay her travel expenses back to New York City and she was essentially stranded in Los Angeles.<sup>20</sup> Thankfully a friend offered her his home in Palm Springs to rest and relax. While she and Virgie, her faithful maid, “rehabilitated” in Palm Springs, Hildegarde tried to get her manager to book her in Las Vegas, Reno, Phoenix, and Lake Tahoe. Instead she got an event in Omaha.<sup>21</sup> One of Hildegarde’s friends complained to her manager that he was not working enough to get Hildegarde booked and essentially argued that with the right management she could still be a great draw. The Omaha shows went well because she had many adoring fans who showed up to see her. Her performance was good, but musically—due to pay and lack of rehearsals with the other musicians—the show was mediocre. Still her fans continued to show up to see her.<sup>22</sup>

Unfortunately this set the tone for much of the rest of the decade. Her audiences across the nation dwindled. She began taking jobs in the Caribbean for lower pay than she was long accustomed to earning. No matter where she performed, it was evident her popularity had waned. When it was suggested in *Variety* that an appearance by Hildegarde at a resort was an attempt by the resort management to test the waters before they booked more prominent acts, Hildegarde was furious. She demanded her manager request a retraction.<sup>23</sup> While Hildegarde saw this as an insult in 1960, it was a clear indicator of the reality of Hildegarde’s popularity. This does not mean that she did not have successes, but they were much more limited than just ten years previous. She was no longer able to “pack” the house every night.

By 1965 in an attempt to start a “world tour,” Hildegarde and her new version of Anna, a woman named Mary Collins, set out to try and arrange to travel the world, starting in Great Britain. They intended to make it to South Africa as part of the Hildegarde’s new concert tour. Hildegarde looked at herself as almost a spiritual guide to Mary who was acting as “co-producer” to the one-woman show of Hildegarde’s in London.<sup>24</sup> Once in London, Hildegarde performed at her booked engagements. She received good reviews though some columnists noted her performance harkened to the pre-war and war time era. At least one reporter referred to her as “vintage.”<sup>25</sup> After her booked dates ended, one unfortunate thing led to another and Hildegarde and Mary found themselves literally penniless, living in London while trying to get booked anywhere in London. Meanwhile they also tried to set the dates for a trip to South Africa. None of these things happened. Back in New York City, her manager was of no help. Hildegarde and Mary became so desperate that Hildegarde resorted to pawning an expensive ring in order to have money for rent and food.<sup>26</sup> She could not even afford to come back to the United States and found herself stuck in London with no work and having to move to a low cost apartment until they could somehow manage to get the money together to return home.<sup>27</sup> Throughout the ordeal Hildegarde continued to hope that her prayers would be answered and that she would be booked for a South African tour, but it was not to be.<sup>28</sup>

In spite of Hildegarde’s presence everyday in church, often praying to have a booking on the world tour, she was unable to make her dream of a tour come true. She genuinely believed that God would grant her monetary rewards and successes. When the tour idea fell through she opted instead to borrow money from friends in order to book passage home. On April 29, 1966, Hildy flew back to New York City while Mary sailed



home in order to transport all of Hildegarde's luggage in her state room. Most important about this incident was that to cover the truth of the desperate situation in which Hildegarde and Mary found themselves, a cover story was created which mimicked the story circulated about Hildegarde's botched tour in Los Angeles. This time, as the story went in the newspapers, Hildegarde and Mary were set for a two-year worldwide "One Woman Show" but while in London, the first leg of their trip, Hildegarde suffered a slipped disk in her back which meant "the planned dates were obliged to be canceled."<sup>29</sup> There was no mention that they could not get a date booked in South Africa or that Hildegarde pawned her jewelry to pay for food.

The reasons for these issues with Hildegarde's performances and lack of attendance at her shows was partly due to the changing times, partly due to poor management. Not every show was geared towards the "One Woman Show" idea but many were and this was problematic. Hildegarde attempted to sell this idea to audiences throughout the decade but the problem was that it was different than her old performances in night-clubs and cabarets. Essentially what she and her management had were concerts in the modern sense of the word but in the 1960s time frame—before fans of Hildegarde's genre were prepared for this style of performance. At issue was the inability of anyone, Hildegarde or management, to sell the idea to the public. They lacked the language to properly sell Hildegarde as having moved on from intimate night-clubs to concert-sized venues. Since they could not aptly describe why Hildegarde's show was different and new, the audience never received the message. Instead, most potential audience members probably assumed it was business as usual with Hildegarde,

when in fact her performing in auditoriums and traditional styled theaters was far afield from her usual intimate setting in a supper-club.

Hildegarde's career could not keep up with the changing times and this was a definite blow to her pride and ambition. Even though it was clear that her career was waning, for Hildegarde her career had great potential. She still had ambitious plans to richer and more famous, which seems to be a long way from her chosen spiritual path as a Carmelite of the Third Order. Her detachment with the realities of her career was as vast as the chasm which separated her from the current trends in society. For example, while stranded in London in 1966, Hildegarde was out in Trafalgar Square and saw "such odd beatniks again."<sup>30</sup> "One boy had long hair and it looked like he had crucifixes for earrings!!" London in 1966 was a center of fashion for the youth culture of the world. Young men with long hair and earrings were the rule not the exception and the idea of a "beatnik" had actually come and gone. Beatnik culture in the U.S. peaked in the late 1950s and bled into the early 1960s but by 1966 had faded and been replaced by hippies. Referring to youth culture as "beatniks" faded from use. The American youth culture was in flux and was headed into the Haight-Ashbury and Vietnam protest era. In London, a similar phenomenon occurred which led to London being heralded at the "The Swinging City."<sup>31</sup> This phrase was used predominantly in newspapers and magazines and just a few weeks after her interaction with the young man in Trafalgar Square, *Time* ran a cover which was titled: "LONDON: The Swinging City."<sup>32</sup> This title viewed London as the epicenter of fashion, music, and culture.<sup>33</sup> Hildegarde did not appreciate this reality or "get it."

The world had changed and Hildegarde remained the same, all the while trying to keep updating her act but to no avail. She was no longer able to get contracts in the “hot spots” and had resorted playing in venues she deemed beneath her. Hildegarde was losing her star power and was very well aware of it. This led to her continuously worrying about money and fame, and she noted it all in her diaries. One of the worst blows came in 1969 when New Holstein Inc. an organization run by Mark H. Alkire, proposed to name a city street in her Wisconsin hometown after her. The locals also wanted to have a day dedicated to her in order to give her the key to the city. New Holstein Inc. was a group interested in the “betterment” and promotion of the small community. The street to be named after Hildegarde was in a newly built housing addition.<sup>34</sup> The people wanted to pay homage to the most famous person at that time who emerged from their small farming town. Before the event, conflicts arose between the organizers and the common council of New Holstein which objected to naming a street after her. The council felt renaming a boulevard after Hildegarde was not a good idea because it was set a “weighty precedent,” had larger implications, and would insult other famous people from the small town. They cited the example of Dr. Harry Steenbock, a New Holstein native and biochemist at University Wisconsin Madison, who patented a way to put Vitamin D into foods and helped eliminate numerous bone diseases, including rickets.<sup>35</sup> Certainly, Dr. Steenbock had done important work, but the name “Steenbock” did not attract the same type of attention as the “Incomparable Hildegarde.” The focus of New Holstein Inc. was to attract tourists and business to the small farming community of roughly 2,000 people. They had hoped a “Homecoming for Hildegarde” would mean a boost in business for their local economy.

Announcements were made that “Hildegard Lane” was to be declared at a ceremony. New Holstein Inc. had the street signs ready to put in place for the big event. Just a week before the ceremony the common council voted down renaming the street. Organizers decided the show must go on and had the event anyway. All of the infighting was made public through newspaper articles leading up to Hildegard’s appearance. When the fateful day arrived and it was time to honor Hildegard in New Holstein, no one came. The only people in attendance were the mayor, police chief, and the president of the Chamber of Commerce. The few audience members were a group of women from the Appleton, Wisconsin YMCA Auxiliary. No locals from New Holstein attended in spite of the fact that numerous stores carried large banners in their windows which read “Welcome Home Hildegard.” Pettiness won the day and much to the embarrassment of the mayor, the council delivered the fatal blow to the event. This influenced enough people to not attend. The local papers as well as the papers in Milwaukee carried the story with painful headlines like “Hildegard Suffers Hometown Snubbing” in the *Wisconsin State Journal*, “Hildegard Incomparable, but Turnout in New Holstein is Not” in the *Appleton Post-Crescent*, and “Hildegard Comes Home, but to a Cool Reception” in the *Milwaukee Journal*.<sup>36</sup>

Oddly enough, Hildegard’s diaries do not reflect the dismal turnout for the special event. Her diaries proclaimed great success, spoke of the women from Appleton, and discussed the events surrounding the main event including the reception dinner afterwards. Apparently she wrote to Charlie House, the *Milwaukee Journal* reporter who wrote one of the articles, asking him to retract his story.<sup>37</sup> The news about the street-naming controversy had been news for a week before she arrived; several newspapers

carried similar stories. Either Hildegarde's impression of the event is skewed or the news reporters who wrote the stories lied for some reason about the whole event. It is difficult to believe that several newspapers were in collusion to make Hildegarde look bad. Either way, Hildegarde called her sister Germaine to explain about "ambiguous publicity" from the *Journal*.<sup>38</sup>

Not every moment of Hildegarde's career or life was terrible during this decade, but overall she was dissatisfied with the outcomes on a professional level. In 1963, she published her memoirs, started working to get a sponsorship deal from a hankie company (one of her performance trademarks), and started working on a similar deal for a signature full-length opera gloves with Sentinel Gloves. Doubleday was very happy to inform Hildegarde only a few months after her book was published it had sold 11,237 copies.<sup>39</sup> Hildegarde sent her book to friends, family, and famous people with whom she had associated over the years. Rose Kennedy expressed in a thank you letter to "Hildie" that she was sorry to not have these health tips earlier in her life.<sup>40</sup> During this time, Hildegarde got her own apartment for the first time since her breakup with Anna, something which she relished.<sup>41</sup> Unfortunately, she was forced to start performing in places like Ray Colomb's Supper Club in Chicago which was, in Hildegarde's view, seedy and beneath her.<sup>42</sup> The future looked bleak for her career if the 1970s unfolded anything like the 1960s. Fortunately for Hildegarde, during the 1970s when Americans were entrenched in the melancholy of Vietnam, Nixon, an oil crisis, and the Cold War, they began looking backwards towards the more glamorous days of a bygone era when life seemed to embody a better time.<sup>43</sup> This backwards gaze helped Hildegarde stay in the public eye since she embodied that lost past.

### **If You Find Yourself in that Nostalgic Rage<sup>44</sup>**

Hildegarde could not see, even by the 1970s, that her career would never again be the same as it had been thirty years previous. Although she was happy that Richard Nixon was in office, little else brought her satisfaction. The one thing Hildegarde relied on as the constant was her faith and her activities in the Roman Catholic Church. After she broke ties with Anna, Hildegarde became more dedicated to conservative values and took vows as a third order Carmelite nun. This all led to a much more rigid interpretation of the world around her as she judged it through her religion. But during the late 1960s and early 1970s, even her beloved Church changed too, much to Hildegarde's dissatisfaction. Vatican II began changes that had great effects upon the Church and its adherents. In 1970 in St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City, Mass was said with the theme of the service geared towards honoring Martin Luther King, Jr. During the offertory part of the service, Hildegarde was appalled because the music played had a folk singer accompanied by a guitar, flute, and trumpet. Hildegarde felt "jazz tempo folk song" for the offertory during mass was disrespectful and not "reverend."<sup>45</sup> The Church, allowing a "jazz tempo" piece as the song at offertory, was but one of the changes which occurred in Roman Catholic liturgy as a result of Vatican II. The changes may have upset some Catholics, but they were heartily embraced by many as the laity felt more included in the rites of their faith. When the changes first occurred (the first Sunday of Advent, November 29, 1964) even Hildegarde loved the new Mass. Those first changes were radical and included Hildegarde hearing Mass for the first time in English, as the priest faced the people. In fact Hildegarde felt those alterations made the service feel

“more holy.”<sup>46</sup> By 1970, when more liturgical changes were made, Hildegarde was not happy and felt disenfranchised, not just because of the new types of songs but by the new changes to the Mass which included the addition of more readings during mass including one from the Old Testament.<sup>47</sup> Before this, the Catholic liturgy only included Old Testament readings during special Masses, such as Easter and the Epiphany, but was not something which occurred during regular Sunday Mass.<sup>48</sup> Toward those 1970 changes, Hildegarde was not as receptive; she complained in her diary.<sup>49</sup> She was not enthusiastic about these later alterations to her faith. It left the impression she had moved from relative open mindedness in the early 1960s to a distinct rigidity in her beliefs by 1970. For the most part, it was as if her earlier life and explorations as a young woman never occurred. Hildegarde never tried to reconcile her rigid judgments with the realities of her past. Hildegarde was seemingly out of touch with the changing culture around her, yet, as was the case often in Hildegarde’s life, this too was contradicted by some of Hildegarde’s decisions in the early 1970s.

Hildegarde was not totally blind to the world around her, though often her personal sentiments seemed dated and out of step with the modern perspective. She went to movies and interacted with the rapidly changing social structure. She kept adding new music to her repertoire even though her patrons came to see her perform her past hits. And while she rejected the folk singer and jazz tempo in church, she maintained a diverse group of show business contacts who came from different genres. Surprisingly enough, Hildegarde actually appreciated rock and roll bands and musicians. She valued their talent and felt the British band “The Who were great.” In 1970 when the documentary *Woodstock* came out in movie theaters, Hildegarde paid \$4 for a ticket and attended the

movie. This is important for several reasons, not the least of which was her viewpoint expressed in her diaries about the film. Her reaction was to call it a “really great film” and then to speak of the bands who performed as “great musicians.” Although she felt they were “animals” because of their use of curse words, which she claimed “goes against me,” she also felt the movie was a “Revelation” which it most assuredly would have been for someone of Hildegarde’s social standing and religiosity. This did not stop her from gushing about what a great guitarist Richie Havens was or that she also liked The Who.<sup>50</sup>

More interesting than her reaction to this event is the fact she made a conscious decision to attend the movie in the first place. Obviously by this time Hildegarde had philosophically taken a conservative turn and part of that was due to her adherence to the expectations of her Roman Catholicism. She was usually in a church every day praying the rosary and attending mass frequently. This stands in stark contrast to her attendance at the *Woodstock* documentary. When Woodstock the music festival originally occurred from August 15-18, 1969, Hildegarde made no mention of it at all in her diary. Not a year later, however, she was intrigued enough to attend the film version in spite of the advertising which clearly outlined the content of the film. The *New York Times* ran an article/review of the film on March 27, 1970 titled “Woodstock Ecstasy Caught on Film,” something that was thereafter used in the advertisements of the film.<sup>51</sup> This ensured that everyone who saw the advertisements in the newspaper understood the scandalous scenes available in this “R” rated film. Not only was the *New York Times* headline in the subsequent advertisements, but it was accompanied by a sentence from the article which said it all: “A record of an extraordinary event...three days of music, mud, grass, love,



milk, skinny dipping, acid, cokes, hot dogs, love, meth, music.”<sup>52</sup> There is no mistaking that from the film rating to the reviews to the advertisements that *Woodstock* contained scandalous and immoral material. This was confirmed by other publicity which told about the attendees of the music festival who “make love in the bushes.”<sup>53</sup> Patrons of the movie clearly understood the content. Hildegarde never explained the reason she decided to attend a film. Although it was true that some Catholic nuns attended the festival, it seems doubtful that the majority of Hildegarde’s contacts in the Church supported anything related to Woodstock the festival or *Woodstock* the movie. Yet Hildegarde chose to go and actually liked it. In spite of her religious beliefs and practices, she continued to make her own decisions and was still drawn to the same type of open lifestyle she enjoyed in her youth. *Woodstock* was a clear departure from her regular routine.

This was not the only case of Hildegarde attending a controversial film. In 1972 while in Florida performing, she chose to go see the new movie *Superfly* which was certainly contentious at the time. The film was part of what were called “blaxploitation” films and attracted a great deal of attention for showing a cocaine dealer in a positive light. Hildegarde wrote that she was deeply offended by the movie, which puts into question her motivation for attending the film. She said it was her first “black film” and declared that it was violent and full of “obscenity” which “went against me.” This was not something that could have been a surprise.<sup>54</sup> The movie was criticized in the black community for showing a one-sided view of African American life.<sup>55</sup> The advertisements for the film used quotations from reviews, at least one of which promised the film contained “sex.”<sup>56</sup> Hildegarde’s choice to see *Superfly* was as incongruous and

perplexing as her decision to see *Woodstock*. When she saw *The Graduate* in March 1968, she was offended by the use of “Jesus Christ” as a curse in the movie.<sup>57</sup> Yet knowing full well what *Woodstock* and *Superfly* had to offer, she still chose to see them. Though perplexing, this offers some insight into Hildegard personally. These anomalies perhaps indicate that her diaries had been written as much as a part of her public persona as the newspaper articles and stories about her rather than as private utterances meant only for herself. In her diaries, Hildegard portrayed herself as she wanted to be perceived even though her lived experiences betrayed that persona. Obviously, Hildegard was more open to the modern society than she let it be known.

Perhaps it was that sort of “free thinking,” though limited, which kept Hildegard striving for super stardom in spite of the odds against her and led her into new ventures related to her performances and in the business world during the 1970s. Still struggling financially, Hildegard continually looked for ways to improve her fiscal situation and increase her stardom. In 1970 she owed \$5000 in taxes but did not have the money to pay the debt outright. While her sister, Beatrice (Honey) in Milwaukee created an investment portfolio for Hildegard which had a capital gains earning of \$7000 in 1970, Hildegard still could not afford to pay her IRS bill.<sup>58</sup> She readily admitted in her diary to spending more than she earned but that she had an obligation to live up to her “star image.”<sup>59</sup> But this was something with which Hildegard had struggled since Anna’s departure. She eagerly pursued a new cosmetics line targeting women over 50, but that never came to fruition in spite of her meeting with Revlon in an attempt to renew her relationship with them.

One of her investments which was more fruitful was her financial relationship with Mountain Valley Water, a bottled water which Hildegard consumed instead of tap water. Hildegard's love of the product and endorsement of it led to her becoming involved intimately with the company not only as a spokeswoman but reportedly as the Vice President "at-large" of the company.<sup>60</sup> The president of the company was a fan of Hildegard's, attended a show of hers, and thus began a relationship which benefitted both parties. Hildegard was a natural foods enthusiast and spoke frequently about her diet and use of vitamins and supplements for her health, this new association was one which suited her well. Because Hildegard also endorsed a brand of vitamin and finally got the business of having her own line of hankies and opera gloves, two of her signature stage props, to come to fruition.

Her business ventures were not the only ways Hildegard explored new ideas in this time of her life. For instance, in this decade Hildegard started performing in a completely different venue. She began guest starring for local orchestras, something which should seem familiar to the modern American. This was very much different for Hildy. It meant she had less overhead since she came in to perform with an established orchestra and therefore did not need to hire an orchestra or conductor. She simply arrived, rehearsed, performed in a nice venue to a receptive audience, and then went home. San Antonio was particularly responsive to her performance with the San Antonio Symphony.<sup>61</sup> Her performance there generated accolades. This eventually led to Hildegard becoming part of the "Community Concert Series" where she travelled around the country performing in smaller venues like Lawton, Oklahoma and Lowell, Massachusetts.<sup>62</sup> In addition to the symphonic performances, Hildegard added a banjo

to her routine. For this she had to learn to play a stringed instrument which is much different than the discipline of playing a piano. Her banjo-playing linked her to the “folk tradition” as well as added comic relief for the audience. If the audience received her banjo like her personal friends (who thought it hysterical to see and hear Hildegard playing a banjo), then this too was a hit.

In 1973, Hildegard got the chance to stretch far past her usual talents and perform in a musical. *Follies*, Stephen Sondheim’s Tony Award winning Broadway show, had debuted in 1971. The play told the story of old entertainers who had been part of the glory days of Broadway through their participation in the Weissman Follies, Sondheim’s pseudonym for the famed Ziegfeld Follies.<sup>63</sup> This was the perfect venue for old performers like Hildegard and when the Broadway show went on the road, Hildegard became part of the cast for the road show. Hildegard, along with other well-worn celebrities such as Selma Diamond and Robert Alda (father of Alan Alda), took Sondheim’s musical on the road.<sup>64</sup> Early in her career, Hildegard appeared occasionally in stage productions and always hoped to have the chance to be an actress. But when she had this chance, she did not like it very much and within months of beginning in her role, she left the show.<sup>65</sup>

*Follies* embodied the nostalgic sentiment for the past which swept the country in the 1970s. This trend of looking to the past to soothe the worries of the modern world was not new to American culture.<sup>66</sup> It became such a driving factor for the early 1970s that at least one historian has referred to this as a time of “recycled culture.”<sup>67</sup> Americans were looking to escape from the multiple disappointing events which dominated the landscape, including Vietnam and the assassinations of 1968, among other things. They

did so by embracing a false representation of a bygone era when American life was less complicated and more genuine.<sup>68</sup> This looking towards the past and specifically the 1930s, meant numerous celebrities from the past were recycled as well.<sup>69</sup>

Nostalgia made *Follies* popular but it also generated enough interest in past entertainment that it created once again audiences for Hildegarde. For this reason she was able to maintain a career throughout the 1970s and ride a new trend in popular culture towards sentimentality of the past. Newspaper articles used the word “nostalgia” frequently and generated interest in a bygone era of music and glamour. This helped Hildegarde and was something she even noted in one of her scrapbooks. Nostalgia no doubt played a role in Hildegarde being booked again in the Persian Room in 1975. Hildegarde was in the news where she always longed to be, with headlines like “Hildegarde: Last of the Red Hot Chanteuses.” People took notice.<sup>70</sup> But it was not just Hildegarde who rode this wave of longing for the past and history. Anna, too, capitalized on the trend and with it finally found her own voice and place without Hildegarde.

### **Together Again**

During the 1970s and 1980s, Hildegarde and Anna Sosenko patched up their stormy relationship—or at least became cordial once again. Their reunion started at a mutual friend’s funeral: Jacqueline Susann, the author of most notably *Valley of the Dolls*. Over the years, Anna had made attempts at managing other stars but it never worked out the way it had with Hildegarde. Yet, Anna remained active in the entertainment community and maintained a strong reputation as a mover and shaker in the entertainment industry. Even though the two women lived, worked, and circulated in

the same circles, somehow they escaped facing one another for nearly twenty years. This was quite a feat in light of the relatively small circle of friends they shared. Hildegarde was often warned before an event if Anna was expected to be present. Sometimes she avoided her and sometimes literally passed each other on the street without speaking, both pretending not to see the other as if in mutual agreement not to acknowledge the other's presence.<sup>71</sup> Over the years they continued to share some friends, some of whom like Jackie Susann pressured them to reconcile and end the feud because it was the right thing to do, a suggestion at which Hildegarde balked.<sup>72</sup> In an ironic twist, Hildegarde and Anna became known for the very same endeavor in the last portions of their careers. For much of the 1970s through the end of Hildegarde's career, she performed and worked for benefits. From the Muscular Dystrophy Telethons to working with Danny Thomas for St. Jude's Hospital to various Catholic organizations, Hildegarde generously donated her time for others. One of the ways Anna Sosenko used her talents in entertainment was also organizing benefits, in her case for various theatrical organizations and tributes to icons of American music.<sup>73</sup>

Anna enveloped herself in the stage scene of New York City and produced several different shows. One was a notable production with Ethel Merman and Mary Martin.<sup>74</sup> For this Anna was back in the spotlight and getting accolades for her skills. Anna was the consummate fan and she melded that interest with her love of entertainment and the industry, creating a niche market for herself. She also sold antiques related to the history of American popular culture. She became an entertainment historian and scholar, something noted in her obituary in *Billboard* on June 24, 2000. Her shop, the Seven Arts Collectors Gallery was located at 8 West 62<sup>nd</sup> Street in New

York City, and as was suggested by the address of her store (on the corner of West 62<sup>nd</sup> and Central Park West), the shop was very successful.<sup>75</sup> Her reputation was such that in 1976 she organized a special exhibit, “The Shuberts,” for the Museum of the City of New York which ran for nine months in 1976.<sup>76</sup> This exhibit garnered Anna a great deal of attention and gave her the chance to publicize a benefit for another performer. But it also showed the respect Anna built over the years. She was recognized as a “theatrical historian and archivist.”<sup>77</sup> Although Anna never found success again as a personal manager, she was very successful in her preservation of entertainment memorabilia. She was known for taking various items from one celebrity and then artistically framing them for sale. Anna also had an extensive Gershwin collection which attracted the attention of the Library of Congress in the early 1980s when there was interest in compiling a major collection of the George and Ira Gershwin. It was well known at the time that Anna had the largest collection of their materials and the Library of Congress paid a great deal of money for her items.<sup>78</sup>

Living at and working at Central Park West and becoming renown as a scholar and archivist of entertainment history did not save Anna from feeling bitter over the relationship with Hildegarde. She clearly harbored resentment over having “created” Hildegarde the entertainer and then having her “work” simply walk away with everything she created. Realistically, Hildegarde left Anna with nothing. Hildy took the stage persona Anna so cleverly crafted, forcing Anna to start from scratch. This was something Anna felt free to share during interviews throughout the last years of her life. She referred to her life as being “in two parts.”<sup>79</sup> Part “A” was her creation of Hildegarde and becoming, “the woman who succeeded in the man’s world of show business long before

anyone was talking women's 'lib'" and part "B" was her successful transformation into entertainment collector.<sup>80</sup> Anna made sure those who interviewed her understood her contributions to show business. Anna bragged that she had "never known failure."<sup>81</sup> She unabashedly took complete credit for Hildegarde, not just the career but the entire Hildegarde persona. Interviewers obliged her viewpoint by making bold statements such as "She had Created a woman named Hildegarde" as if Hildegarde were some sort of Frankenstein stitched together by a mad scientist.<sup>82</sup> Anna gave no credit to Hildegarde in any regard. She freely offered to an interviewer: "For much of the '30s and '40s, we lived in Paris and worked throughout Western Europe, where I picked her clothes, planned her advertising, made her deals, and even styled her lighting."<sup>83</sup> What she said was true; she created and sold an international chanteuse to the American public who eagerly consumed it. What is interesting about Anna is that she, like Hildegarde, continued to maintain the "facts" she created as truths even though she knew they were not correct, such as the statement that she and Hildegarde lived in Paris in the 1940s when in fact Hildegarde could not have lived in Paris while selling her European nostalgia to her American fans.

It was clear that Anna's "public ownership" of Hildegarde the person and performer was meant to irritate Hildegarde. It showed Anna's anger and bitterness over losing Hildegarde. Anna felt that Hildegarde was a product she had created and her rights to that product were revoked. In the 1990s, Anna agreed to interview with Jean-Claude Baker, one of the many adopted sons of Josephine Baker, for a book he was writing about Josephine. While Hildegarde and Anna lived in Paris, they had become friends with Josephine and her husband Petit. Josephine performed and recorded



Anna's songs. The interview was to be about Josephine's life when she lived in Europe during the tumultuous and notorious 1930s. The interview however is a referendum on Hildegarde and Anna's relationship and breakup rather than a discussion of Josephine and her husband/manager Pepito.<sup>84</sup>

Over the years, the anger at least on Hildegarde's part remained strong. The women would meet, catch up, and have dinner. When Hildegarde wrote of their encounters in her diaries, they were tempered with side commentary regarding Anna's demeanor and personality. It took another ten years after their initial meeting at Jacqueline Susann's funeral for their relationship to truly mend. In 1984, Anna invited Hildegarde to participate in one of her benefits, "Legends and Showstoppers," with such luminaries as Bobby Short, Peggy Lee, and Liza Minnelli. Anna said she wanted Hildy on the bill because Hildegarde was "legitimately a legend."<sup>85</sup> By 1991, Anna invited Hildegarde to her apartment and a few years later they made the *New York Post* because they were seen out dining and celebrating Anna's birthday.<sup>86</sup> They were able to bury the hatchet so to speak and came to terms with their past and present. The truth was that Anna and Hildegarde knew each other better than anyone else in their lives. They had shared too much, had too much success, and had lived together for too long not to have remnants of that intimate connection that otherwise proved elusive for them both in later years.

### **The Legend**

On February 1, 1986, "The Incomparable Hildegarde" celebrated her eightieth birthday in true show business fashion by having a birthday performance at Carnegie

Hall. The public was invited to purchase tickets and join Hildegarde in a celebration of her life and career. The event promised to take the audience on a tour of Hildegarde's professional career and to treat them to an actual reproduction of her successful radio program, *Hildegarde's Raleigh Room*, using an actual script from one of the shows. (Tallulah Bankhead, one of Anna and Hildegarde's good friends from that era, had appeared as a guest in the original edition) Most impressive was not that Hildegarde would perform for the Carnegie Hall crowd but that the master of ceremonies and the person who acted out all the parts in the *Raleigh Room* script (including Tallulah) was Charles Pierce the most well known female impersonator of that time. Here on stage was Hildegarde the devout pious Catholic and third order Carmelite with the self titled "Master and Mistress of Disguise" Charles Pierce, in drag.<sup>87</sup> It was just another of the ironies in Hildegarde's life.

Hildegarde continued performing until 1995. Counting her time spent playing for silent movie houses in Milwaukee, this meant her career spanned seventy-three years. She was slowed down by age in the final years of her career, yet she continued to perform and travel across the United States and to Europe. The last fifteen years of her public life often involved various tributes to her life and career. For New Yorkers at least, Hildegarde was still a recognizable name in the mid-1990s. Articles appeared which updated cabaret fans as to her comings and goings.<sup>88</sup> Hildegarde "helped" her own legacy from 1977 through 1982 by donating most of her extensive scrapbook collection to various archives across the country. The Marquette University Special Collections and Archives, the New York Public Library, and the University of Wyoming all benefitted from Hildegarde's attention to the preservation of her legacy. She also generously

donated an extensive collection of her evening gowns to Mount Mary College in Milwaukee.

Hildegarde was very aware of her legacy and wanted to be remembered as an influential entertainer and devout Catholic. Donating her collections to archives was one way she sought to accomplish this. She also agreed to do interviews with authors in order to appear in books. Hildegarde was already familiar with the power of the pen because of her own autobiography. She had also been in print in 1965 when she appeared in the book *A Gift Of Prophecy: The Phenomenal Jeanne Dixon* about the preeminent American psychic.<sup>89</sup> Later in life, Hildegarde assisted with two books. One was a biography about her friend Jackie Susann published in 1987, *Lovely Me: The Life of Jacqueline Susann*.<sup>90</sup> In 2003, she made a guest appearance in *Young at Heart: 61 Extraordinary Americans Tell How to Defy Age with Zest* by Anne Snowden Crosman. *Young at Heart* provided Hildegarde a format to talk about one of her most beloved topics, health.<sup>91</sup> Hildegarde, even into her 80s, obsessed about her weight, weighed herself every day, and went on fad diets, including a liquid diet. It was something that consumed her throughout her life and continued into her old age.

Granting interviews for books provided her the opportunity to embellish her life story a little more. She often talked about Eddie Garr who by this time was known as Teri Garr's father. In this time period Hildegarde had been writing in her diaries about her affair with Eddie Garr. Claiming she still had feelings for him but did not really remember what happened with the relationship. In truth, Anna was what happened with their relationship. Hildegarde was upset when Teri Garr herself appeared on the cover of *Redbook* in 1991 and spoke of her father in the article but failed to mention "he was in

love with me.” Hildegard neglected to mention his notable excessive drinking which eventually landed him in a hospital or the fact she took a ring he gave her and had it melted down and made into a ring for Anna. Hildegard saw to it that the information that was published about her and Eddie Garr left the impression he was one of her lovers.<sup>92</sup>

The “assistance” Hildegard gave to Barbara Seaman for *Lovely Me: The Life of Jacqueline Susann* illustrated how Hildegard reconciled her past life with her current ideology. Jacqueline Susann had been part of the lives of Hildegard and Anna since the mid-1940s. In Susann’s biography, Barbara Seaman acknowledged and thanked Hildegard in the introduction. For this project, Hildegard sorted through all of her diaries to find anything she had written about Susann. Hildegard apparently provided excellent records for Seaman which is clear when comparing Seaman’s writing to Hildegard’s diaries. This is particularly remarkable in light of the fact that Hildegard did not allow Seaman to actually use the diaries personally as a reference for the biography. Hildegard looked through her diaries, noted the pertinent information, then passed these notes to Seaman. This is clear because of inaccuracies about Hildegard which appeared in Seaman’s writing. The biography tells of the life of Jacqueline in all of its sordid detail. Hildegard provided intimate details of Susann’s life but revised her own part in the stories.<sup>93</sup> What is clear is that Hildegard used the stories about Jacqueline Susann to illuminate Susann’s flaws while at the same time reshaping her own past, something she also did in her own autobiography.

Jackie Susann was married to Irving Mansfield and at the time she was involved with Anna and Hildegard in the 1940s was considering converting to Catholicism, even

though her husband was Jewish. Jackie attended Mass frequently with Hildegarde.<sup>94</sup> Irving and Jackie frequented the supper-clubs and night-clubs where Hildegarde performed.<sup>95</sup> Anna and Hildy and Jackie and Irving were close friends and were often guests in each other's homes. Eventually, Susann became notorious for her book *Valley of the Dolls*, an expose about the excessive and casual use of drugs and illicit sex among her contemporaries. In spite of the fact Jackie was married to Irving, she became notorious for her sexual affairs with women, most notably, Ethel Merman who was a dear friend of Anna.<sup>96</sup> Once Hildegarde and Anna split Susann remained friends with both and she tried over the years to convince Hildegarde to make peace with Anna. Eventually, Hildegarde and Susann drifted apart, mainly due to her insistence that Hildegarde needed to do the Christian thing and forgive Anna.<sup>97</sup> Anna remained a confidant of Susann's and was one of only three people who knew she was sick with cancer.<sup>98</sup>

Hildegarde knew Jackie well and wrote of her often in her diaries. When Seaman expressed interest in the 1980s in details Hildegarde could provide, Hildegarde was more than willing to help. Even at this stage of her career, Hildegarde was still very well aware of her image, the public persona that she and Anna had worked so hard to groom and sell to the public. So Hildegarde seized the opportunity to embellish her life story once more by exposing the seamy side of another person. An excellent example of this is evident in Seaman's book when Hildegarde told of Susann's issues with insomnia and her predilection for taking drugs to sleep. This particular section focused on the year of 1946 when Susann became pregnant. Much of this information was provided by Hildegarde. Seaman wrote: "Hildegarde had insomnia too, but she didn't like to rely on

chemicals. Prayer helped her sometimes, and exercise. They disagreed on pills but Jackie admired Hildegarde, and asked her to be godmother to her baby.”<sup>99</sup> Hildegarde “outed” her friend as relaying on pills while at the same time claiming she herself never used pills.<sup>100</sup> Hildegarde’s story of her own use of sleeping aids and “pills” from this era is blatantly untrue. For example, a diary entry from February 27, 1946, the very year Susann found herself pregnant, Hildegarde wrote: “Had a bad nite—despite the 1 ½ gr [grain] of secanol at 4:00 I took ½ gr. of Pheno[barbital] –just could not sleep—then up at 9:00 took 1 aspirin—Felt awful when I got up—after breakfast took 10 mg of Benzadrine—walked to N.B.C—after ½ hr. didn’t feel so badly.”<sup>101</sup> Clearly on this day Hildegarde did not try to pray to end her insomnia, and as is evidenced repeatedly in her diaries, this was not an isolated incident. Hildegarde and Anna throughout their years together took an assortment of uppers and downers, often with alcohol. And Hildegarde continued taking assorted sleeping pills throughout her life, at least until her late 80s, including Milltowns and Unisom.<sup>102</sup> The point here is that if Hildegarde had forgotten her own use of pills to sleep and then to wake up, her memory would without doubt have been jogged due to her reading and re-reading of her own diaries.

Hildegarde understood her fame and what contributed to that fame. She was always interested in talking about her work and in performing. She never stopped wanting to be the center of attention. This is most poignantly evident at the end of her last extant diary. On December 31, 1991, at the age of eighty-five Hildegarde wrote: “And so ends another year—as usual I was disappointed. My career not going the way I’d like.”<sup>103</sup> At an age when most others are decades past retirement, Hildegarde lamented not having enough success with her career. When Hildegarde made her last

foray into the spotlight, in the June 1998 edition of *Vanity Fair*, it must have thrilled her to be recognized by Annie Leibovitz and Richard Merkin as one of the most important and influential figures of the lost “gorgeous galaxy of New York nightlife.”<sup>104</sup>

Thankfully, according the article, the women who were most responsible for that elegant era were still alive, “mature, poised, chic, sound of tonsil,” and “goddamned legendary.”<sup>105</sup> This faintly remembered elegance of the Persian Room and the Savoy Plaza, in some ways mirrored Hildegarde’s forgotten status in American memory. Some New Yorkers, like Annie Liebovitz, remembered the supper-club era in the city and Hildegarde but both were largely forgotten in mainstream American culture. One can only imagine how exciting this was for Hildegarde who was three years past retirement when Leibovitz came to her apartment for the photo shoot. There is little doubt she understood this was probably her last hurrah. But she also most certainly appreciated being elevated to her rightful place as a cultural icon one last time.

Hildegarde fell and broke her hip in 2000, which led to a convalescence in Mary Manning Walsh Nursing Home in Manhattan. Both of her sisters, Honey and Jane, and their husbands had already passed away, leaving no children and no relatives for Hildegarde. Anna, her longtime cohort, confidant, and companion had passed away on June 9, 2000. She left behind a legacy of her own in the entertainment field, making sure that the majority of her estate was used to establish the Anna Sosenko Assist Trust which offers grants to “enhance the career development of worthy and talented individuals in need of such assistance in the performance areas of theater, opera, or concert.”<sup>106</sup>

Hildegarde however, was not entirely alone at the end of her life. She was visited by many friends, but attended to most closely by her manager and friend, Don Dellair, who

with his partner Tommy Wonder had managed Hildegarde's career from the early 1970s until her retirement. On June 29, 2005, at 99 years old, Hildegarde's career truly came to a close. Her obituary appeared in newspapers around the world. Most of them gave her credit as having many "firsts" in show business. Certainly some people remembered her as "The Incomparable Hildegarde," but few remembered her importance in American culture as the "silky voiced blonde who" sang "the way Garbo looked."<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Morris, "The Night; Life's Still A Cabaret" *New York Times*, February 6, 1994. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>2</sup> Obituary of Adele Ormiston, Magazine Editor *New York Times*, June 28, 1979. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>3</sup> For references to Hildegarde being a third order Carmelite nun, see: Frank Hall, "Meet the 'Incomparable Hildegarde'" *Palm Beach Post*, July 17, 1969 and Lucille Storen, "Faith Keeps Performer, 68, Young and Successful" *Catholic News*, April 25, 1974, Scrapbook 43, Hildegarde (Loretta Sell) Papers, Marquette University, Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Milwaukee, Wisconsin (hereafter cited as HLS Papers, MU). For more information about the Carmelite Third Order, see: "Third Order" on the website The Carmelites: The Order of the Brothers of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel, <http://ocarm.org/en/content/ocarm/third-order>.

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Jones, *Beauty Imagined: A History of the Global Beauty Industry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 276

<sup>5</sup> Several historians use the phrase "general malaise" to describe the 1970s in the United States including, Stanley Buder, *Capitalizing on Change: A Social History of American Business* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Angelika Bammer, *Partial Visions: Feminism and Utopianism in the 1970s* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Kelly Boyer Sagert, *The 1970s* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> For more information about the "black is beautiful" movement, see: Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> The information about Hildegarde's Las Vegas performance including the playbill from the Painted Desert Room and several newspaper clippings are in Scrapbook 4, The Hildegarde Collection, American Heritage Center, The University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming (hereafter cited as: Hildegarde Collection, AHC).

<sup>8</sup> Information about the *Can-Can* production is in Scrapbook 6, Hildegarde Collection, AHC.

<sup>9</sup> For examples of Hildegarde's issues with lines, see: Diaries, July 23 and 25, 1956.

<sup>10</sup> Sim Meyers, "Hildegarde Big Swan Room Hit: Evident She is Still 'Star of Stars'" *Times-Picayune*, New Orleans, LA, April 15, 1959, Scrapbook 30, HLS Papers, MU.

<sup>11</sup> John Ward, "No Laurel Resting for Hildy" *The Atlanta Journal*, (March 14, 1959), Scrapbook 30, HLS Papers, MU.

<sup>12</sup> For information about the effects of television on night-club attendance, see: Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television*, 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition (New York: Oxford University



Press, 1990), 114; Peter Young, *Let's Dance: A Celebration of Ontario's Dance Halls and Summer Dance Pavilions* (Toronto: Natural Heritage/ Natural History Inc., 2002), 136, Google Books; Jack Gould, "TV Makes Inroads on Big Radio Chains" *New York Times*, June 27, 1951. ProQuest Historical Newspapers

<sup>13</sup> Nina C. Leibman, *Living Room Lectures: The Fifties Family in Film and Television* (Austin: University of Texas, 1995), 3; Paul Meehan, *Horror Noir: Where Cinema's Dark Sisters Meet* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2011), 145.

<sup>14</sup> This syndicated column by Bernard Gavzer appeared in newspapers across the nation in early March under varying titles. For example, see: "Hildegard Says Night Clubbers Being Gypped" *Anderson Daily Bulletin*, Anderson Indiana; "Do Clothes Make the Song?: Hildegard Blasts Sweatshirt Singers" *Bismarck Tribune*, Bismarck, N.D.; "Hildegard Takes Crack at Sloppy Joes" *San Mateo Times*, San Mateo, CA.; "Hildegard Says French Singers in Sloppy Dress Gyp Audiences" *Ada Evening News*, Ada, OK. Available through Access Newspaper Archive, [www.access.newspaperarchive.com](http://www.access.newspaperarchive.com).

<sup>15</sup> Diaries, May 6, 1959.

<sup>16</sup> Diaries May 1, 1959 and May 6, 1959.

<sup>17</sup> Diaries, December 21 and 22, 1959.

<sup>18</sup> Diaries, December 31, 1959.

<sup>19</sup> Diaries, January 1, 1960; "Hildegard Cancels Show" *San Francisco Examiner*, January 3, 1960, Scrapbook 32, HLS Papers, MU.

<sup>20</sup> Diaries, January 2, 1960.

<sup>21</sup> Diaries, January 7 and 14, 1960.

<sup>22</sup> Diaries, January 22-28, 1960.

<sup>23</sup> Diaries, September 9 and 15, 1960.

<sup>24</sup> Mary Collins was referred to as "co-producer" in: Vivian Kawatzky, "Hildegard Plays Palace" *Milwaukee Sentinel*, December 25, 1967. Hildegard Clipping File, Milwaukee Public Library, Milwaukee Wisconsin (hereafter cited as Clipping File, MPL).

<sup>25</sup> Several articles and reviews of Hildegard's performance in London are available in Scrapbook 40, HLS Papers, MU. The "vintage" label is in: Peter Hepple, "Nightbeat" unnamed newspaper, November 25, 1965, *ibid*.

<sup>26</sup> Diaries, March 7, 1966; April 18, 1966.

<sup>27</sup> Evidence of these issues is throughout Hildegard's diaries from her time in London. For specific examples, see: March 1-3, 1966.

<sup>28</sup> Diaries, April 18, 1966.

<sup>29</sup> Vivian Kawatzky, "Hildegard Plays the Palace" *Milwaukee Sentinel*, December 25, 1967, Hildegard Clipping File, MPL.

<sup>30</sup> Diaries, March 20, 1966.

<sup>31</sup> Bill Osgerby, *Playboys in Paradise: Masculinity, Youth, and Leisure-Style in Modern America* (New York: Berg Publishers, 2001), 100.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*; Cover, "London: The Swinging City," *Time*, April 15, 1966. <http://www.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19660415,00.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Piri Halasz, "Great Britain: You Can Walk Across It On the Grass," *Time*, April 15, 1966; Simon Rycroft, *Swinging City: A Cultural Geography of London, 1950-1074* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010).

<sup>34</sup> "Star Returning Home: Hildegard to Visit New Holstein" *Sheboygan Press*, Sheboygan, Wisconsin, April 22, 1969. Access Newspaper Archive, [www.access.newspaperarchive.com](http://www.access.newspaperarchive.com).

<sup>35</sup> The story of the refusal of New Holstein common council was carried on the AP wire and appeared in several newspapers across Wisconsin and was reported by local reporters. For example see: "Vote Down 'Hildegard Lane' Plan" *Manitowoc Herald-Times*, June 11, 1969; "Hildegard Suffers Hometown Snubbing" *Wisconsin State Journal*, Madison, Wisconsin, June 16, 1969 (both accessed through Access News Paper Archive [access.newspaperarchive.com](http://www.access.newspaperarchive.com)) and Charles House, "Hildegard Comes Home, but to a Cool Reception" *Milwaukee Journal*, June 15, 1969, Clipping File, MPL. Information about Dr. Harry Steenbock is available on through the library named after him at University of Wisconsin at Madison, <http://steenbock.library.wisc.edu/about/#library-history>.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>37</sup> Diaries, June 16, 1969.

<sup>38</sup> Diaries, June 22, 1969.

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- <sup>39</sup> Judy Roberts of Doubleday to Hildegard, July 24, 1963, Hildegard Collection, AHC.
- <sup>40</sup> Rose Kennedy to Hildegard, August 19, 1963, Correspondence, Box1, Hildegard Collection, AHC.
- <sup>41</sup> Diaries, January 1, 1963.
- <sup>42</sup> Diaries, March 19, 1963.
- <sup>43</sup> William Highman, *The Next Big Thing: Spotting and Forecasting Consumer Trends for Profit* (Philadelphia: Kogan Page, Ltd., 2009), 80.
- <sup>44</sup> This phrase is a line from a song written and performed by Jimmy Buffett, "Pencil Thin Mustache" (1974). This particular song embraces the nostalgic feelings of the era.
- <sup>45</sup> Diaries, January 14, 1970.
- <sup>46</sup> Diaries, November 29, 1964.
- <sup>47</sup> Mark Pettison, "Vatican II Liturgical Changes Deeply Felt In, and Beyond the Pews," *Catholic News Service*, October 21, 2005. <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/0506013.htm>.
- <sup>48</sup> Felix Just, S.J., Ph.D., "Lectionary Statistics" The Catholic Lectionary Website, <http://catholic-resources.org/Lectionary/Statistics.htm>.
- <sup>49</sup> Diaries, March 22, 1970; April 19, 1970.
- <sup>50</sup> Quotations come from: Diaries, June 3, 1970.
- <sup>51</sup> Vincent Canby, "Woodstock Ecstasy Caught on Film" *New York Times*, March 27, 1970.
- ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
- <sup>52</sup> Examples of this are found in advertisements which appear in the *New York Times*. For example see May 1 and May 29, 1970.
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>54</sup> Diaries, November 12, 1972.
- <sup>55</sup> "Rising Complaints Shake film Truce with Blacks" *New York Times*, September 27, 1972.
- ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
- <sup>56</sup> Advertisement for *Superfly*, *New York Times*, August 9, 1972. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
- <sup>57</sup> Diaries, March 1, 1968.
- <sup>58</sup> Diaries, March 12, 1970.
- <sup>59</sup> Diaries, March 16, 1970.
- <sup>60</sup> Information about Hildegard's involvement with Mountain Valley Water is found throughout Scrapbook 43, HLS Papers, MU. For specific examples, see: "Singer Hildegard to Promote Spring Water A La Joan Crawford" *Variety*, January 1, 1969; Chauncey Howell, "Art, Et Cetera" unnamed newspaper; Jean Powell, "Hildegard Over 50: Performer and Vice President" *Evening Star*, Washington D.C., January 25, 1969.
- <sup>61</sup> Diaries, December 30, 1970; Mildred Whiteaker, "That's Hildegard: 'Incomparable' Plus Captivating" *San Antonio Express*, December 30, 1970. Access Newspaper Archive.
- <sup>62</sup> "On Concert Series: Incomparable Hildegard to Perform Here Monday" *Sunday Constitution*, Lawton, Oklahoma, November 4, 1973; Alfred W. Burke, "Hildegard, Pianist Walid Haurani Head Community Concert Selections" *Lowell Sun*, June 18, 1973. Access Newspaper Archive.
- <sup>63</sup> Andrew Lamb, *150 Years of Popular Music Theater* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 308.
- <sup>64</sup> Numerous articles carried the story of Hildegard in the *Follies*. For example, see: Dru Wilson, "Benefit Performance Brings Incomparable Lady Here" *Colorado Springs Gazette*, June 8, 1973; Barbara Bladen, "The Marquee: Buy Now and You Won't Cry Later" *San Mateo Times*, July 23, 1973. Access Newspaper Archive.
- <sup>65</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>66</sup> Mark Rice, *Through the Lens of the City: NEA Photography Surveys of the 1970s* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2005), 10.
- <sup>67</sup> John Bush Jones, *Our Musicals Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theater* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, published by the University Press of New England, 2003), 305.
- <sup>68</sup> Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 88-89.
- <sup>69</sup> For more information about America's nostalgic turn, see: Drew Casper, *Hollywood Film 1963-1976: Years of Revolution and Reaction* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), specifically the section "Still Other Gambits: The Nostalgic Wave and the 'Special Event' Movies" in Chapter 4 "Production-

Distribution”; Peter N. Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: America in the 1970s*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), ix; Michael Thomas Carroll, *Popular Modernity in America: Experience, Technology, Mythohistory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 77.

<sup>70</sup> “Hildegarde: Last of the Red Hot Chanteuses” *Providence Journal Bulletin*, August 31, 1974, Scrapbook 47, HLS Papers, MU.

<sup>71</sup> For example, see: Diaries, January 6, 1972.

<sup>72</sup> Diaries, April 6, 1963.

<sup>73</sup> Terri Jentz, “Anna Sosenko: Producer of ‘Legends and Showstopper’” *West Side TV Shopper and Restaurant Guide*, New York City, New York, April 14-20, 1984, Anna Sosenko Papers Collection, the unprocessed collection at Randolph Macon College in Lynchburg, Virginia (hereafter cited as ASC RMC).

<sup>74</sup> Tom Gates, “Anna Sosenko: One of the Best Friends the Theater Ever Had” *Theater Week*, November 2-8, 1987, ASC RMC.

<sup>75</sup> Andy Soltis, “Daily Closeup: A Life in Two Acts” unnamed newspaper, January 30, 1976, and Carol Brener, “Something Old: A Guide to Upper West Side Antique Shops” *New York Magazine*, September 9, 1974, 51, both in the private collection of Rebecca Silver.

<sup>76</sup> Ellen Stern, “Best Bets: Recommendations of Events, Places, and Phenomena of Particular Interest This Week” *New York Magazine*, February 2, 1976, *ibid*.

<sup>77</sup> Soltis, “Daily Closeup.”

<sup>78</sup> Receipt for the sale, ASC RMC.

<sup>79</sup> Anna Sosenko, handwritten mini biography/article, unprocessed collection, *ibid*.

<sup>80</sup> Robert Jacobson, “The Saving Grace of Anna Sosenko,” unnamed magazine, *ibid*.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>83</sup> Tom Gates, “Anna Sosenko: One of the Best Friends the Theater Ever Had,” *Theater Week*, November 2-8, 1987, *ibid*.

<sup>84</sup> Jean-Claude Baker and Chris Chase, *Josephine: The Hungry Heart* (New York: First Cooper Square Press, 2001), 214.

<sup>85</sup> Gates, *Theater Week*, 13.

<sup>86</sup> Diaries, June 14, 1991; Richard Johnson, “Page Six: Sightings” *New York Post*, June 24, 1995.

<sup>87</sup> Jon Pareles, “Pop and Jazz Guide” *New York Times*, January 31, 1986. ProQuest Historical Newspapers; Phoebe Hoban, “It’s Hildeagrde” *New York Magazine*, February 3, 1986.

<sup>88</sup> Morris, “The Night; Life’s Still A Cabaret” *New York Times*; Stephen Holden, “Review/Cabaret: A Spirited Hildegarde Who Never Grows Tired” *New York Times*, February 6, 1994. ProQuest Historical Newspapers; Black Green, “Heads Up!: Hildegarde at 88” *Newsday*, Long Island, New York, January 31, 1994. [newsday.com](http://newsday.com); “The Incomparable Hildegarde Opens White Barn Season” *The Hour*, Norwalk Connecticut, July 19, 1993. Google News.

<sup>89</sup> Ruth Montgomery, *A Gift of Prophecy: The Phenomenal Jeanne Dixon* (New York: William Morrow, 1965).

<sup>90</sup> This book was first published in 1987 by William Morrow. I used the most recent (1996) published version for my research. Barbara Seaman, *Lovely Me: The Life of Jacqueline Susann* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1996), 159. Google eBook.

<sup>91</sup> Anne Snowden Crosman, *Young At Heart: 61 Extraordinary Americans Tell How to Defy Age with Zest* (Bothell, WA.: Book Publishers Network, 2005), 177-188.

<sup>92</sup> Crosman, 184.

<sup>93</sup> Barbara Seaman, *Lovely Me: The Life of Jacqueline Susann* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1996), 149, 159. Google eBook

<sup>94</sup> For example, see: Diaries, April 21, 1946; June 9, 1946.

<sup>95</sup> For example, see: Diaries March 24, 1955.

<sup>96</sup> Seaman, 246.

<sup>97</sup> Diaries, March 20, 1960.

<sup>98</sup> Irving Mansfield related this information to Hildegarde. He told her only three people, Anna Sosenko, Doris Day, and Rex Reed knew Jacqueline was ill. Diaries, September 25, 1974.

<sup>99</sup> Seaman, 159.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*.

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<sup>101</sup> Diaries, February 26, 1946.

<sup>102</sup> For example, see: Diaries, January 15, 1991.

<sup>103</sup> Diaries, December 31, 1991.

<sup>104</sup> Richard Merkin and Annie Liebowitz, “Sophisticated Ladies” *Vanity Fair*, June 1998.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Anna Sosenko Assist Trust, “About the Trust,” [www.annasosenkotrust.org](http://www.annasosenkotrust.org).

<sup>107</sup> “Radio: Art and Tires” *Time*, March 13, 1939.

### Afterword

Anna Dear,  
Before you read this—please know I love and adore  
you so much—and I know how hard this has been for  
you—(the very thing you and I have dreaded so  
much) I bless you as I know God blesses you too—  
Love H.<sup>1</sup>

The short note above exists alone, unattached to any newspaper clipping or magazine article. It bears no date. The subject is not known. It is poignant nonetheless. The note is different than other letters discussed in this manuscript which were shared between Hildegard and Anna. The words and sentiments provide a window into the intimacy shared between Anna and Hildegard rather than the business matters or the vitriol which dominated so much of their correspondence throughout their lives together. Instead this note shows a shared life and shared fears which give depth to the nature of their relationship. Whatever it was that Anna and Hildegard dreaded is not known, but it is not difficult to logically assume it was their real relationship. Since their professional and personal bond was already public knowledge, it may have been the more intimate nature of their private lives that instilled dread should it be made public. What is most unusual about this note is the depth of affection and love Hildegard expresses for Anna which is absent in other letters. Clearly the sentiment, written on a small piece of scrap paper, was meant for Anna's eyes alone and not meant to be saved or shared. It is this intimacy which is largely missing from Hildegard's diaries and correspondence to Anna. It highlights the fact that Hildegard saw her diaries as part of her public record,

and while she expressed her respect, anger, and exasperation at Anna in them, she never expressed such raw emotion or love towards her partner.

The question most often posed over the years to me about this study is: “Was Hildegarde a lesbian?” I realized quickly what this meant was, “Did she and Anna have sex?” While usually not asked by the academics in Queer Theory or Queer Studies with whom I have associated over the years, most others want to know if I found any evidence that Hildegarde and Anna consummated their relationship sexually. This question is troubling for many reasons not the least of which is the fact that reducing any “real” relationship only to sexual intercourse denigrates that relationship. By placing focus on the actual sex act, we draw attention away from the importance of this dissertation and Hildegarde’s life. It also presumes that without the sex act there was no intimate relationship, thereby denigrating the numerous couples gay and straight who may not have sex by choice or due to medical issues. In response to this query, I explain that having sex does not a relationship make; the real question is “Were Hildegarde and Anna in a same-sex relationship?” and to this I can answer resoundingly, yes. No, I found no incendiary evidence in the diaries of them specifically engaging in intercourse. The onus to prove this beyond reasonable doubt is an unfair burden. As was pointed out in *The Gay and Lesbian Theatrical Legacy: A Biographical Dictionary of Major Figures in American Stage History in the Pre-Stonewall Era*, this burden of proof is not something placed on historians or academics who write about heterosexual couples.<sup>2</sup> This book goes on to state that a lack of “hard” evidence such as love letters or the like “neither proves nor disproves the existence of desire.”<sup>3</sup>

Hildegarde's sexuality before her relationship with Anna did not include sexual intercourse. This is evidenced by her being referred to as a "touch me not" when she was performing in vaudeville. Yes, she enticed men with various forms of intimate encounters including kissing and what could be qualified as "heavy petting," but she was clear in her diaries she never would succumb to intercourse. Not engaging in sexual intercourse with Anna would have been part of the pattern established by Hildegarde but does not indicate she was not part of an intimate relationship.

What is certain is that Hildegarde and Anna had a relationship that was tumultuous and full of viciousness and love, all at the same time. Their fights became notorious across the nation as did Anna's temper. Anna needed to control Hildegarde's every move, including her performance. From Hildegarde's hand gestures to the stage lighting, Anna's quest for perfection ran rough shod over every musician, theater owner, and stage hand she encountered. Her vitriol was not limited to outsiders. It was actually focused on Hildegarde more than any other. Hildegarde took a great deal of abuse from Anna as is indicated by the letter sent from Anna's doctor to Hildegarde apologizing for not being able to help control Anna's rage. Even though she was the focus of that rage, Hildegarde chose to remain with Anna. This is not the typical decision to stay with a manager that was so exceedingly harsh. Hildy chose to stay in a relationship professionally and personally, and remain living in a situation that was traumatic at best. This, in and of itself, indicates that theirs was a relationship far past the boundaries of simply manager and performer.

Hildegarde and Anna's relationship played a pertinent role in Hildegarde's career. In fact, the relationship was the framework for her career. Before Anna, Hildegarde

enjoyed relatively minor stardom; after Anna became her personal manager, Hildegarde had a true, profitable career which catapulted her into the spotlight. After the relationship devolved into the “The Firm of Hildegarde and Anna Sosenko” in order to dissolve the relationship, Hildegarde’s career virtually ended. Yes, she rode the coattails of her own stardom after the breakup until her death, but never again was destined to be a groundbreaking star. Part of this is due to the changing times of the 1950s and her career having run its course, but an equal part was because Anna no longer managed her career. It seemed without Anna, Hildegarde was no longer incomparable.

While some criticize examining the most intimate part of the lives of historical figures, historians who have dedicated themselves to researching LGBT issues argue that sexuality is essential to uncovering the full lives of their subjects.<sup>4</sup> Sexuality is according to these historians as important as ethnicity or upbringing to how people view and react to their world and culture.<sup>5</sup> This applies to Hildegarde and Anna in a very specific way in that their relationship was presented to the American public in coded language. Hildegarde was very feminine and Anna was packaged in veiled masculine terms which was exemplified by the columnist who proclaimed he would owe Anna a cigar because of Hildegarde’s success during one particular year. Although Sigmund Freud reportedly proclaimed that sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, in the case of Anna, a cigar was a direct characterization of her. The meaning was clear. And both Anna and Hildegarde understood this. Hildegarde was clearly sensitive to the innuendo about them in newspaper articles; she expressed it in her letter to Anna regarding how they were portrayed in a Chicago newspaper’s review of their appearance on *Person to Person*.



Anna too understood the implications of the exploration of their relationship in the media. At one point in 1951, she refused to appear in a picture with Hildegard for the *New York Herald Tribune*.<sup>6</sup> Anna's refusal to appear with Hildegard became the focus of this particular newspaper article. While she insisted that Hildegard needed to be in the spotlight as the artiste and that those who control the entertainment business should stay in the background, it seems to be a weak reason for her absence. In fact, Anna said she should not be in the picture at all "because the public knows too much about entertainers' lives already."<sup>7</sup> Anna was not bothered appearing in articles with Hildegard before this incident, but suddenly in 1951, she no longer wanted to be part of the limelight. American culture was taking a turn towards more conservative values in the early 1950s and Anna most likely understood that. It was best for Hildegard's public image that Anna stayed out of the picture.

During the majority of Hildegard's greatest successes, her private life with Anna was part of her public persona. With Anna presented as masculine and Hildegard as ultra feminine, they were essentially presented as a stereotypical heterosexual couple. This was further entrenched by George Frazier's book published in 1947. Presumably, Americans understood the innuendo. This did not prevent Hildegard from gaining popularity or from becoming influential with American women. It seems she became very popular in spite of her relationship with Anna. Americans loved Hildegard and were not bothered by her relationship which means that Americans may not have been as rigid in their interpretation of accepted roles for women in the 1940s and part of the 1950s. While movie studios were going to great lengths to make their female stars into

domestic goddesses, Hildegarde and Anna were busy shunning that image and Americans loved her anyway.

That brings up the point as to whether or not Anna and Hildegarde were “out” regarding their sexuality. The answer to that is no, not in the modern sense. And it is very doubtful either of them would have ever embraced a public label of “lesbian,” especially not Hildegarde with the extreme right turn she took in later years. This leads to the issue of “outing” and whether or not by writing such a manuscript as this and discussing the subjects’ sexuality is crossing any lines. To this I would argue that I have not “outed” Hildegarde and Anna. Their contemporaries understood their relationship and wrote about it long before this project began. Their private connection was made public and can be seen as more of an inside joke that everyone knew. Hildegarde was never photographed on a date or linked publically with men. It was always her and Anna. Even after the split, Hildegarde was not attached to men as romantic interests. In addition, Hildegarde and Anna have long been embraced by the LGBT community as being the first openly lesbian couple. This became most obvious with Hildegarde’s death in 2005 when obituaries for her appeared in LGBT online forums. One titled “Glamorous Lesbian Takes Wing to the Beyond” said Hildegarde was “a right-on lesbian.”<sup>8</sup> Another from [www.AfterEllen.com](http://www.AfterEllen.com), titled “Funny, My Romances Never Worked Out Either” openly lamented the fact that Hildegarde’s obituaries “creatively de-gayed” her life.<sup>9</sup>

These are not isolated examples. Anna’s niece acknowledged her aunt and Hildegarde as a lesbian couple.<sup>10</sup> In another instance, Hildegarde appeared as a lesbian in Caroline Kinzer’s book, *Men, Music, and Mirth*, a memoir of Kinzer’s father. In it,

Kinzer tells about her childhood and seeing Hildegarde perform and flirt with her father in the audience. Her mother was never threatened by Hildegarde's flirtatious advances towards her husband because Hildegarde "traveled with her lesbian lover and manager, Anna Sosenko."<sup>11</sup> Perhaps Kinzer made a profound point here concerning the liberties Hildegarde was allowed with men while she performed. This too could be a reason Hildegarde got away with making slightly risqué jokes during her performances and flirting with married men. Laurence Senelick, a well known historian of the LGBT historical involvement with the theater, wrote a review of the aforementioned book, *The Gay and Lesbian Theatrical Legacy*. In his review for the *Journal of the History of Sexuality*. Senelick argued that several notable "piano entertainers" had been left out of the book including, "the begloved Hildegarde and her formidable manager/lover Anna Sosenko."<sup>12</sup> These are only a few examples but they are representative of the fact that for Hildegarde and Anna, their sexuality was already part of popular culture lore.

In some ways, Hildegarde's sexuality has become more of a legacy than her actual singing career. It is also most likely one of the reasons she and Anna fell out of favor by the mid-1950s. They both seemed to have suffered from the backlash against the relative freedoms experienced in American culture in the 1940s. While new performers stepped into the spotlight capitalizing on the Hildegarde "brand" like Liberace, Hildegarde was no longer *en vogue*. Her popularity slipped just as television was fixing certain images in the minds of Americans and Hildegarde was not part of that. Ironically, Liberace, the person who most blatantly took much of Hildegarde's stage show, was very similar to her. Liberace was a pianist, also from Milwaukee, and came from an immigrant family. He took the idea of the single name from Hildegarde as well

as her closing song of “I’ll Be Seeing You.” Privately he also hid the fact that he was gay, something he denied vehemently to the end. He even sued an English paper for defamation after they printed a story saying that he was a homosexual. Liberace, unlike Hildegarde, was able to publically proclaim his masculinity while keeping his private life mostly private in spite of his flamboyant style on stage.

Hildegarde was only able to reclaim her place earning a good living on stage in the 1970s when the American public became nostalgic for the less complicated lifestyle of the not so distant past. Times had changed and Hildegarde’s conservative views left her oddly outside of the world which embraced her. Yet she was able to find a place in the new, albeit smaller, world of cabaret which came to embody the lost art of night-club and supper-club performances. The cabaret was not the same one in which Hildegarde had participated in her youth. As time passed, Hildegarde’s venues slipped from the large and luscious supper-clubs to smaller, more intimate cabarets. When she was younger, Hildegarde sought to distance herself from her cabaret past and at the end of her career returned to the place her real career was born.

Her career encompassed most of the twentieth-century. She participated in some manner in all of the major changes in American entertainment and popular culture including the rise of radio and the dawn of television. Even rock-and-roll was part of Hildegarde’s career since she blamed Elvis and the Beatles for ruining the glamour of the world to which she was accustomed.<sup>13</sup> During the height of her popularity, she was one of the most respected and loved entertainers in the United States, so much so that Eleanor Roosevelt reportedly proclaimed her the “Queen of the Supper-Clubs.” Yet in spite of this, her legacy became lost in the American memory. Hildegarde’s career and

popularity and “forgotten” status is not an anomaly in the history of popular culture or American history. Influential people certainly have been lost to history and then rediscovered. Re-introducing these people to the historical narrative changes the understanding of American culture. Finding these lost stories necessitates a more thorough attention to detail from historians during research. This will be the only way to truly preserve “real” American history and not simply the version of it which has trickled down into the modern American lexicon. More work also needs to be done to explore how some are remembered and others forgotten. This matter will most likely need to address the significance of television and movies in preserving a visual memory of celebrities for Americans.

It is important for historians to continue looking deeply into the nuances of the American past. The more “Hildegardes” we find, the richer our history becomes. Without doubt, there are other influential characters in America who, once discovered, will deepen everyone’s understanding of American history. An excellent example of this would be the Fly Girls, the women who were Air Force pilots during World War II and who were “lost” until the late 1970s. Understanding their contributions and their patriotism expands historian’s understanding of American culture and the armed services during World War II as well as serves as inspiration for all who hear their story. I have no doubt there are countless others who, like Hildegarde, were influential in their time and could not only change the modern perspective of their eras, but deserve to have their reputations and historical importance restored. In order to do this, academics and historians need to heed the advice of noted women’s historian Linda Gordon when she

said “if you listen quietly and intently to the people who appear in your historical source material, it sometimes happens that they begin to speak to you.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hildegard to Anna Sosenko, private collection of Rebecca Silver, Cherry Hill, New Jersey.

<sup>2</sup> Billy J. Harbin, Kim Marra, and Robert A. Schanke, eds. “Introduction” in *The Gay and Lesbian Theatrical Legacy: A Biographical Dictionary of Major Figures In American Stage history in the Pre-Stonewall Era* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 2. Kim Marra and Robert Schanke, “Introduction” in *Staging Desire: Queer Readings of American Theater History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Tex McCrary and Jinx Falkenburg, “New York Close-Up,” *New York Herald Tribune*, February 18, 1951, Envelope 1, Hildegard Sell Collection, Billy Rose Theater Collection, New York Public Library, New York City, New York ( hereafter cited as HSC BRTC NYPL).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> “Glamorous Lesbian Takes Wings to the Beyond” [www.thebosh.com](http://www.thebosh.com), July 31, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Sarah Warn, “Best Lesbian Week Ever...Funny, My Romances Never Worked Out Either” [www.AfterEllen.com](http://www.AfterEllen.com), August 5, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Rebecca Silver, interview by Monica S. Gallamore, October 22, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Caroline Lawrence Kinzer, *Men, Music, and Mirth* (Pittsburgh: Lauriat Press, 2010), 30. Google Books.

<sup>12</sup> Laurence Senelick, review of *The Gay and Lesbian Theatrical Legacy: A Biographical Dictionary of Major Figures in American Stage History in the Pre-Stonewall Era*, Billy J. Harbin, Kim Marra, and Robert A. Schanke, eds., *Journal of the History of Sexuality* (September 2006): 502-508. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4629677> Accessed January 24, 2012.

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