

Sweethearts of Song

The Lennon Sisters have always loved performing, but they saw themselves as the “kids down the street.”

By Janet and Kathy Lennon

On Christmas Eve 1955, we Lennon Sisters, then ages 9-16, were preparing to make our first appearance on The Lawrence Welk Show, which was in its first season on TV.

Just before the live broadcast, someone from one of the show’s sponsors said to us, “Only 30 million people are watching...” Kathy remembers herself and Peggy just staring at each other.

Despite having sung publicly only in church and at Elks and Rotary clubs, the four of us rose to the occasion, not only for that first show, but for most Saturday nights over the next 12-plus years.

We’d see the nervousness in each other’s eyes, but we kept it from affecting our performance. At the time of our debut, Janet was just 9 years old; Kathy, 12; Peggy, 14; and Dianne, whom we call Dee Dee, 16.

Ordinary Beginnings

We believe we were anchored by our beginnings. Before the Lennon sisters became The Lennon Sisters, the four oldest children of William and Isabelle Lennon lived somewhat ordinary lives as part of a large family—at the time, there were “only” eight kids. What wasn’t ordinary were the living arrangements of our family of 11, which was crammed, sardine-like, into a two-bedroom house in Venice, California.

At one point, there were two sets of bunk beds and a fold-out bed in one bedroom and three babies in the other. Our parents slept in the living room, while our grandmother Nana lived in a tiny room in the back of the house.

There was no room for dressers, so our clever mother obtained long, wide bread drawers from “Jim the Baker,” who used such drawers in his delivery trucks. The drawers fit perfectly under each bed and stored our clothing.

Our mother’s creativity also came into play when she purchased a single bike and a single pair of skates for herself, then lent them to her children. This eliminated any possibility of bickering and led us siblings to become resourceful. We recall each wearing a single skate and scooting around the block together.

There was very little money to go around, especially for vacations, but we don’t remember ever feeling deprived. We have wonderful memories of making annual visits to our Great-Uncle Max’s apricot ranch north of Los Angeles. For a week or so every year, we picked fruit, went fishing and sold apricots at a roadside stand.

Our father’s job as a milkman also helped the money situation. One of the perks was getting 120 quarts of milk a week for his family. Without the help, we wonder how it would have been possible to feed all of us!

In light of our cramped house, we had a dream of building a dormitory for ourselves in the backyard, putting money away through our singing appearances for our area’s local civic organizations.

It was at one of these performances, in late 1955, that fame began falling into our laps. Dee Dee had just finished singing for an Elks Club party. Among the attendees was a classmate of hers, Larry Welk, who told her that his father, Lawrence Welk, was starting a new television show. Larry asked Dee Dee if she and her three sisters would like to sing for him.

The Next Big Act

We all went over to the Welk home and wound up singing for Mr. Welk in his living room. He signed us up to sing for his Christmas

Eve show on live national television.

For the first 8 years, The Lawrence Welk Show was broadcast live at 6 p.m. on the West Coast, where it was produced, and 9 p.m. in the East. As we remember it, the show went to a live-on-tape format (with a same-day broadcast) when the show transitioned from black-and-white to color.

However, from our standpoint, the change made no difference in how we approached the show. There were no cuts or retakes, so every taping was exactly as the live broadcasts were—goofs and flubs included.

Rehearsals took place every Thursday night at the Aragon Ballroom, close to our home, at a now-vanished amusement park in Venice called Pacific Ocean Park. The orchestra also played regular gigs there twice a week.

We sisters got to know many of our young peers from the era, including Fabian, Bobby Vee, Paul Petersen, Shelley Fabares, Brenda Lee and the child stars of TV's Father Knows Best.

One of our great thrills came when we appeared as TV guests a number of times on The Mickey Mouse Club. We were very excited to hang out with Bobby, Annette, Tommy, Cubby, Karen and the whole gang. Because of labor laws, we had to attend school while on the set, and we were delighted to have all the Mouseketeers as classmates. Being of high school age, Dee Dee and Peggy thought this was “cool,” but not nearly so much as we younger girls, who were still in grammar school.

Staying Grounded

As for being celebrities, we didn't think in those terms. We saw ourselves as just another couple of young girls going to parochial school with our local cousins—70 of them!—and living normal lives. Along with school, our regular routine consisted of changing diapers and washing dishes—no maids for us!

As much as we loved singing, it didn't define who we were. While we have loved performing, we feel that none of us, Dee Dee and Peggy included, had a particularly huge drive to be onstage or be in the entertainment business.

In fact, there were moments when we made great sacrifices. Kathy missed her high school graduation and Janet missed her prom because we were touring with the Lawrence Welk band. We were devastated at the time; we just wanted to be like everyone else at our school—just another group of kids down the street.

In Kathy's case, she received a bit of consolation. She was awarded her diploma onstage in front of a crowd of 10,000 at a Washington, D.C. theater. Jack Lennon, our father's brother (and Kathy's godfather), was working in the diplomatic corps as consulate general to Sargent Shriver, the ambassador to France. Jack flew in from Paris to personally present the diploma to Kathy and give her one of her most cherished memories.

The rising popularity of The Lennon Sisters also resulted in Peggy and Dee Dee, as teenagers, being teased a lot about our music skewing toward an older audience. As the younger sisters, we didn't feel the embarrassment of the teasing in the same way.

That our fans loved our performances, we considered a blessing. Looking back, we feel that because of our upbringing, we were well grounded, especially for being celebrity kids. None of us ever had the desire to go solo.

Who We Are

Our sense of identity is rooted in our loving upbringing, which led us to embrace the notion that "God only made one me." We think it's noteworthy that in talking with our siblings in the wake of the passing of our mother in 2005, we each felt that we were "Mom's favorite."

We never did build the dreamed-of dormitory in our backyard. Our

growing family eventually moved into a larger house in Venice with six bedrooms to pack in our family's now six girls and five boys, plus our parents and grandmother. There was still only one bathroom, but somehow we managed to make it work through a spirit of cooperation and teamwork—plus lots of love and laughter.

With all of our fame, one of our fondest memories as sisters is of our father taking one of us at a time onto the middle of the otherwise empty Aragon Ballroom floor.

The world-famous Lawrence Welk Orchestra would begin to play, and we would dance, with our father singing softly to us—truly magical moments for his four budding “celebrities.”

Lennon Sisters Show-Biz News

KATHY AND JANET Lennon still keep in touch with many of the people they met and worked with on The Lawrence Welk Show from 1955 to 1968, including crew and band members.

They both established lifelong friendships with a number of the show's guests, including Jimmy Durante, Bill Medley, Paul Revere, Perry Como, Sammy Davis Jr. and Glen Campbell. One of their most special relationships is with Andy Williams, whom they look upon as a big brother to this day.

Tommy Cole, one of the Mouseketeers they met during their The Mickey Mouse Club appearances, later became a makeup man for ABC's TV studios. He worked with The Lennon Sisters on numerous occasions, including their own show with Jimmy Durante, which lasted a season, from September 1969 to July 1970.

In the 1970s, the sisters performed regularly on The Andy Williams Show and toured with Williams around the country.

Numerous other appearances were made on such programs as Bing Crosby's Christmas show, The Roy Rogers Show and The

Dinah Shore Show and game shows such as The Hollywood Squares, Tattletales and Family Feud.

They continued to produce music and tour in the 1980s and '90s, performing as headliners at the Welk Champagne Theatre, in Branson, Missouri, from 1994 to 2004.

When Peggy retired from singing, in 1999, younger sister Mimi took her place. Dianne, who had left the Welk show and the quartet from 1960 to '64 to concentrate on marriage and children, retired for good in 2001.

Kathy, Janet and Mimi continue to perform together and will join the Gatlin Brothers for a seasonal Christmas show at Branson's Welk Resort, starting in late October.

All Dolled Up

The introduction to the public of their Best Pals dolls has been a dream of Kathy and Janet Lennon's for many years. The cloth dolls are replicas of the ones designed and handmade by their mother, Isabelle, and grandma Nana.

From childhood, the sisters recall that the dolls were the one thing they always took with them on their many travels. This has continued over the years, including their many tours with the Lawrence Welk Orchestra, and even to this day. As Kathy and Janet moved from hotel to hotel, they always felt connected to home through their dolls.

They created Best Pals as a valentine for the next generation of children and for the child inside each of us.