In Pittsburgh, he was a stage show emcee—a now defunct species that flourished during those halcyon days of the American movie palace, from around 1925 to 1932. In those frenetic years, the city’s "super deluxe" theaters were invariably "vaudefilm" houses, patrons getting for their money not only a first-run film together with assorted celluloid featurettes but from four to seven "live" acts of vaudeville. In point of fact, what brought Dick Powell to Pittsburgh early in 1929 was the decision made by Warner Brothers’ zone headquarters to revamp the weekly vaudeville bills at their Enright Theater in East Liberty. They had in mind incorporating them into stage shows over which Powell, as the resident master of ceremonies, would preside. And though Powell considered his very first show a disaster, he was "going strong" the second week. What was the secret of his success? A voice from the 1930s says what needs saying: "We all had fun with Powell"—and this because "he painted the clouds with sunshine." No mean feat in a Depression-haunted America.

For Powell the road to Pittsburgh began in Mountain View, Arkansas, where he was born on November 14, 1904. His father, Ewing Powell, was an agent for the International Harvester Company, and in response to the dictates of his job, he soon removed his family to Berryville and then in 1917 or 1918 to Little Rock, where young Dick attended high school. By his own admission, he spent four years trying to graduate—"but I couldn’t make it." Then after a brief

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John L. Marsh, a professor of English at Edinboro State College, first published in this journal in 1974. His articles have also appeared in *Pennsylvania Heritage, Pennsylvania History*, and *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*. The photographs accompanying the article are courtesy of Jerry L. George, also of Edinboro’s English faculty.—Editor

1 The time frame is perhaps arbitrary, but in 1925 bandleader Paul Ash, the prototype for Charlie Davis at the Ohio and Indiana theaters and Powell at the Enright and Stanley, was lured from the Granada Theater in San Francisco to Chicago's Oriental Theater, where his stage band shows became the rage of the city. In 1932, Powell departed for Hollywood and both the Indiana and Stanley abandoned their stage show policies.

2 Interview with Darrell V. Martin, Oct. 9, 1981. Martin, one of Powell’s Pittsburgh friends, is a personality in his own right, writing the first by-line radio column "in the world" for the *Gazette Times* in 1924.

3 Quoted in a *Pittsburgh Press* feature, Sept. 14, 1936. Titled "Dick
stint — no more than three months — at the preparatory department of Little Rock College he left in November 1922 "to go to work." Powell was neither lazy nor lacking in intelligence; rather his efforts and energies went into singing in one or another of several local church choirs and into studying and playing the saxophone, the cornet, and the clarinet.

Indeed, Powell's decision to put school behind him seems to have been prompted by a desire to transform an avocation into a professional career of sorts. Toward this end, he joined the Peter Pan Orchestra in Little Rock in 1923, playing the cornet and singing with the four-piece group, which played dance engagements locally and between the reels of silent movies at a Main Street theater — perhaps the Majestic. Then, in 1924, Powell graduated to a review unit that was appearing in small-time vaudeville houses in the St. Louis suburbs. However, the act in which he was featured was a flop. Returning home to Little Rock, he went to work in the commercial department of the Southwestern Bell Telephone Company. Presumably, he was determined to be a prudent professional man in his father's image. What he had not counted on was the appearance in Little Rock of the Royal Peacock Orchestra, playing an engagement at the Rainbow Gardens Ballroom in December 1924.

Powell, who had come to dance to their music with a girl from the phone company, was given the opportunity to sing with them on one or more occasions. Youthfully appealing and vocally talented, he seemed a natural addition to their ranks. Unfortunately, he was one they could not afford, at least for the moment. Then, in the fall of 1925, the Peacocks wired him to join them in Louisville, where they were appearing at the New Kentucky Hotel. Once again Powell changed directions — this time to become a band singer. In the days to come, fellow musicians were quick to note that young women were slowing Powell's Own Story," it was ostensibly written by Powell, but a secondary credit reads "As Told to Ruth McTammany." The Press carried a second installment as well as a third on Sept. 15 and 16.

4 This extract from the records is supplied by Fr. George Tribou of the Catholic High School for Boys, Little Rock. Many newspaper stories over the years incorrectly indicate that Powell was a student of Little Rock College proper. Subsequent to Powell's day, Little Rock College became St. John's Seminary and the preparatory department the Catholic High School for Boys.

5 The suggestion is made by H. Lynn Wassell, Jr., of Little Rock, whose family knew Powell "quite well." Of the Peter Pan, Powell is quoted in a Modern Screen article (Jan. 1934) as saying, "It [the band] was as lousy as it [the name] sounds."

6 His days at the phone company are recalled by Vera Harvill, a retired employee. She describes him as a happy person who dated another company employee, Blanche Hart. According to Mrs. Harvill, they went to the movies and out dancing frequently.
Dick, one year old in 1905.

An eight-year-old Dick together with his younger brother, Howard.
East Liberty’s Enright Theater. Powell began the Pittsburgh years here in March 1929.
The Powell Pittsburghers knew. Francis Doherr, to whom the photo is inscribed, was the station manager of WCAE, which carried Dick Powell's "Pow-Wow Club."
The Warner Theater, Erie, in April 1931. Powell appeared on its stage twice during the musicians strike in the fall of 1931 that closed out live entertainment on the stage of the Stanley.
their partners in front of the bandstand, hoping for a glance from the handsome tenor. Just as he was acclimating himself to the life, however, friction developed among the Peacocks and they broke up.7 But not before Charlie Davis, the leader of the Ohio Theater's orchestra, had the chance to hear repeated reports of him. So impressed was Davis that he wired the stranded singer "eating money" to come to Indianapolis.

The movies would talk in a year's time, but, for the moment, the Ohio, like other movie theaters in Indianapolis, was a silent film house. In keeping with its estate as a downtowner, it employed a live orchestra — since September 1924 led by Charlie Davis, whose musical versatility and visual showmanship had made the Ohio an important center for live entertainment and this despite the fact that it was nominally a movie house. By the time Powell arrived, the band had grown from seven to eleven members and Davis was in charge of mounting weekly shows featuring local talent and out-of-town vaudevillians. Yet the orchestra's duties were not limited to their highly visible role in the stage show; in this silent era, they played a musical background during the last twelve minutes or so of the film as well as during the newsreel.8

Powell even did little specialty numbers while the picture was on, but his real opportunity came in the stage show that followed. The vocal numbers he was given — "My Blue Heaven," "I Can't Give You Anything But Love," and "At Sundown" — were just what was needed to capture the fancy of the young and the not so young. A long-time friend from the Davis orchestra, in recalling these songs, notes they were more than a little responsible for teenage girls being crazy about the handsome tenor and for the desire older ladies experienced to hold him on their laps.9

Between shows at the Ohio, Powell spent time listening to vaudevillians on the bill. So flattered was he by their estimates of his abilities that within months of his joining Davis, he resigned, together with the band's drummer, to hit the vaudeville circuit once more. In a matter of weeks and after only a handful of bookings, however, it

7 The most authoritative source in print on the Peacocks is Duncan Schiedt's *The Jazz State of Indiana* (privately printed, 1977). H. Reagan Carey of Indianapolis, a fellow musician and good friend of Powell's during this period, has supplied the author with many additional details of the Peacocks.

8 I am indebted to Dr. Fritz Morris of Indianapolis, together with Davis the moving force behind the orchestra, for many of these details, but then Davis, living in retirement in Oswego, New York, has been equally helpful.

was apparent that their act was not successful. By February 1927, Powell was back in Indianapolis. He did get the chance to sing on at least two separate occasions at the Apollo Theater, but his financial situation and professional prospects seemed so bleak that he took to selling insurance with determination, if little enthusiasm.10

Davis, not unaware of Powell's plight, at length relented and late in May took him back — but at a reduced salary. After spending the summer playing at a northern Indiana resort, Davis and company were hired at a salary of $2,600 weekly as the stage band at the prestigious Indiana Theater, which had opened in Indianapolis the previous June. By this time the organization — now a seventeen-man aggregation — was a "slick, well-rehearsed unit," a show so popular that the film invariably ran a distinct second in its drawing power.11 Of course, Dick Powell's presence was, in part, responsible, and the crooning soloist found himself with a following that stretched, as will be seen, from Indianapolis to Pittsburgh.

For the moment, at least, he was concerned with his immediate prospects, and his success at the Indiana must have been welcome, especially in the light of that disastrous venture into vaudeville just the past winter. The theater's owners were surely pleased with the figures at the box office, but could not ignore the sagging grosses at the neighboring Circle Theater, also under their management. Its stage shows just could not compete with the Davis magic, and toward making the theater competitive Powell was sent to the Circle late in May 1928 to function as the emcee of the "live" portion of the programs.12 As he had seen Davis do, first at the Ohio and then at the Indiana, Powell personally introduced the acts and did bits of business with some of them.

One measure of his success is suggested by his salary, reported to be in the vicinity of $500 weekly. However, in October 1928, the Circle, now wired for sound, did away with its stage shows. Once more Powell was "at liberty." Davis, still at the Indiana, might have taken him back, but, in the person of Louis Lowe, he had found — or so he believed — someone no less attractive.13 The only opportunity

10 The best source in print covering Powell's Indianapolis years is a feature article by Howard Caldwell, "Remember a Local Singer Named Dick Powell?" Indianapolis Magazine (Feb. 1976): 19-20.


13 Letter to the author from H. Reagan Carey, Oct. 11, 1981: "It is my opinion that Charlie Davis was satisfied with the situation and hence did not offer Dick another shot with us. It could have been arranged if Charlie had so desired."
that came Powell’s way was a chance to “front the band” at the Indiana Roof Ballroom. He took it, and with his days largely unoccupied, turned again to selling insurance. Quite evidently, his heart was not in it and this despite the encouragement of Edward Gallahue, founder of the American States Insurance Company. The offer that came his way then, early in 1929, to be the emcee at Pittsburgh’s Enright Theater must have been welcome.

Just what prompted this offer or who was responsible for this opportunity is not altogether clear. It may have been William Goldman, the general manager of the Indiana and other Indianapolis theaters, or the crucial recommendation may have been made by a Warner Brothers executive, Reeves Espey, transferred from Indianapolis to Pittsburgh a little before Powell’s arrival. Whatever the case, the Enright was getting a serious and determined young man. He may not have had much of a sense of humor, but then he knew what it was to fail because of the limitations of his own talent as well as what it meant to lose a job as the result of events beyond his control — or his ability to predict. Admittedly, he displayed some early awkwardness, but in his Pittsburgh years Dick Powell matured into a poised personality — one a national audience would soon be applauding on their movie screens.

The Enright in the East Liberty section of the city had opened on December 28, 1928. For the record, it was an impressive house, comparing favorably with the center city’s theaters. One-time patrons recall it carried “a big city feeling,” answering the compulsion to go downtown for entertainment. “When we went to the Enright,” Stanley Mayer recalls, “we felt we were in a real theater. . . .” One evidence of this contention at the beginning of 1929 was the presence not only of a first-run film but of a vaudeville bill that changed weekly. Only the latter was not drawing as the management felt it could or should, and in this situation lies the explanation of the offer Powell received to emcee the stage shows that were to be mounted in place of the vaudeville bills. Not surprisingly, he sought to duplicate locally the format that had been so successful for him in Indianapolis,

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14 Letter to the author from Mrs. Alvin Hendricks, Sept. 12, 1981. Mrs. Hendricks was the bookkeeper and publicist at the Indiana Roof in Powell’s day. She reports Powell telling her that once he had sold insurance to the members of the Davis orchestra, he had nowhere to go.

15 Mrs. Hendricks opts for Goldman. Alvin P. (Al) Marsico, the leader of the Enright orchestra in Powell’s time, believes Espey was the individual responsible for the singer’s coming to Pittsburgh.

to include an entertaining band that could, as the occasion demanded, become a show in itself.\textsuperscript{17}

Powell was not in a position to choose his opening number, but “I’ll Get By” was an apt choice in the long, if not in the short, run. Most immediately, the problem was that it went unheard in the Enright’s barn of an auditorium. Throughout the first week Powell sang as loudly as he could, but his voice did not carry, and there were no microphones to come to his rescue. Recalling this very real dilemma, Powell said in after years: “I tried to ‘get by’ for a week but when Saturday night came — I knew — the manager knew and thousands of Pittsburgh people knew — I was a flop.”\textsuperscript{18} To remedy this state of affairs, he turned to a megaphone such as Rudy Vallee had used on occasion. For him it was not an affectation but a necessity.\textsuperscript{19} With its aid, audiences heard him sing “Vagabond Lover.” Their response was all the proof Powell needed that he was not a flop but the hit of the city.

He opened at the Enright the week beginning March 2, 1929, and presided over thirty-four stage shows before he said his first farewells the week of October 19. Each show was presented three times a day throughout the week, four on Saturday. On weekdays the first show began about 3:30, the second at 7:30, and the final show at 9:30. On Saturdays, the shows were at 2:00, 4:00, 7:30, and 9:30. With titles like “Dixie Days,” “Ride Em Cowboy,” “Jazz A La Carte,” and “At the Seashore,” the typical offering featured four or five acts; on occasion there were as few as three, in one instance as many as seven acts.\textsuperscript{20}

Scanning names of performers at the Enright yields only the Ritz Brothers and Harriet Hilliard (Mrs. Ozzie Nelson), whose presence is apt to provoke recognition. The acts did, however, exhibit vaudeville’s infinite variety. Billed were rope tricksters and contortionists, eccentric dancers and waltz teams. Personality girls vied with comedy teams, an “instrumental nut” with a singing and ukulele trio. There were harmony singers and comic singers as well as singing and dancing comedians — even a pair of whistlers and a female impersonator. For children, animal acts: acrobatic dogs and clowning dogs,

\textsuperscript{17} Interview with Al Marsico, Oct. 2, 1981.
\textsuperscript{18} Quoted in the \textit{Pittsburgh Press}, Sept. 16, 1936. See note 3.
\textsuperscript{19} Powell’s acoustical dilemma is recalled by Darrell Martin, interview, Oct. 9, 1981.
\textsuperscript{20} A sense of what the Enright stage shows were like can be gleaned by consulting their weekly reviews in the Pittsburgh papers. The \textit{Pittsburgh Press} reviewed many of them on page 2 of Sunday’s theater section.
trained seals and comedy horses. It seems unlikely that the individual acts on a particular bill were booked with an eye toward the weekly theme. That was the responsibility of Powell as singing emcee, of the band with its specially chosen numbers, and of the twelve Enright Rockets with their precision dances.

A new show was presented every Friday, and on that day Powell was on hand for the rehearsal, which lasted from about 9:30 A.M. until noon. He took this opportunity to work out his introductions with each of the acts and, incidentally, to lobby the producers — Jerry Mayhall and later Bob Alton — for a greater part or yet another vocal number in the weekly presentations.21 A typical show — like "Dixie Days" — was opened by the Rockets in a dance number reflective of the theme. Dick followed them to introduce the first act: an eccentric dancer. He came on then to croon a romantic "Dixie" ballad. At its conclusion, he brought on a "robust comedian." The latter was succeeded by a production number replete with Southern motifs. Next the band had a number; then Martha Patti, an East Liberty girl, was featured and succeeding her, the finale that brought back the Rockets.

Lasting from forty-five to fifty minutes, the typical stage show cost between $3,000 and $4,000 to mount. According to Al Marsico, the orchestra leader after Labor Day 1929, his musicians got about $100 a week each, the Rockets $60 to $70, and the acts anywhere from $250 to $500 for their week's work. Powell, who began at $150 weekly, was making $250 when he negotiated a three-and-a-half-year "play-or-pay" contract, which guaranteed him a $50 increase every six months. Of course, the contract remained in effect when Powell moved downtown to the Stanley, opening in the flagship theater of Warner Brothers' Pittsburgh zone the week beginning November 4, 1929. The downtown audience, enchanted with Powell, literally took to their hearts his opening song, "You Were Meant For Me." In the chemistry of that week lies a partial explanation of why theaters like the Stanley continued to offer live shows as well as films into the early days of talking pictures. But there were equally mundane factors to be reckoned with.

To begin, the houses in question were almost without exception built during the reign of the silents and had the requisite stage facilities. Then, too, the virtual death of vaudeville as the previous generation had known it left countless performers — the known as well

21 Marsico interview, Oct. 2, 1981, is a source of detailed information on the organization, mechanics, and costs of a typical show. By way of verifying many of these details, the author has found comments by one of the Enright band's early members, John F. Tracey, to be most helpful.
as the unknown — at liberty and desperate to work. Moreover, the major studios, like Warner Brothers, who owned large chains of theaters nationally, quickly discovered that stars from Jean Harlow to Pola Negri could be sent on the road to appear live in those very theaters. The fact that many of them had little or no stage presence was immaterial and was one of the reasons to have an emcee — that is to stand between the Hollywood luminary and an often incredulous — sometimes outraged — theater audience. Powell did so on more than one occasion. In point of fact, his support of Jean Harlow the week beginning December 25, 1931, earned him one of the few unflattering comments the Pittsburgh press directed his way.22

No matter. He retrieved himself, in their eyes at least, the following week. Appearing on the Stanley’s stage with Buddy Rogers, one of the then current crop of movie heartthrobs, it was Dick Powell, not Rogers, who stole the show, and he did it with one of his songs.23 That, of course, was good for business and virtually every stage show allotted a vocal number to the theater’s crooning master of ceremonies. As at the Enright, Powell continued to use a megaphone. Its presence evoked mixed comment, one exasperated viewer going so far as to say, “I would like to hear Dick Powell sing a song other than through a megaphone.”24 From time to time he did without it, but audiences were quick to note that their favorite “megaphoned” his songs the following week. These numbers were invariably the sort of sentimental, romantic ballad that had been his trademark since his days with the Royal Peacocks. Among them, songs with evocative titles include “If I Only Had a Girl Like You” and “I’m Dancing with Tears in My Eyes.” One patron, on hearing him sing “Tea for Two” with Bernice Claire, came away convinced that someday Dick was going to be more than a movie house emcee.25

For the moment, however, these duties were challenge enough, and Powell was content to polish his personality and hone his abilities until he shone “like a diamond.” This meant, among other things, learning to relax, to be himself on stage. And, interestingly, his duties as emcee encouraged him toward this end. For when not singing, he

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22 See reviewer's comments in the Pittsburgh Press theater section, Dec. 26, 1931: "Miss Harlow is aided by Dick Powell. In fact he's eight-tenth's of the act, which it must be said is no compliment."

23 The show in question, "Happy New Year Stage Revel," began Friday, Jan. 1, 1932. The reviewer's comment was taken from the Pittsburgh Press, Jan. 2.

24 Quoted in the review of Powell's third Stanley show, "Bubbles." See the Pittsburgh Press, Nov. 15, 1929.

25 Quoted in the Pittsburgh Press, July 24, 1930.
was introducing the performers joined with him in a particular show and working himself into the business of the various acts — especially the comedians. The latter invariably brought out the boyishness in Powell, one of his most appealing qualities according to Pittsburgh friends from these years. One of his favorites was Joe (Wanna Buy a Duck?) Penner, for whom Powell was always a willing and delighted straight man. As he responded to Penner’s onstage antics, it was obvious he was having fun, and that pleasure came across the footlights. Vicariously, audiences felt themselves up there with “Dick” — laughing not at him but with him, having the kind of fun that is yet “fun” to remember.

In later years, Powell would speak of his emcee days being a wonderful experience, “like playing stock is for an actor.” He is also quoted as feeling he got the chance to be an emcee when the days of the movie house stage show were numbered. That indeed they were may have been suggested by the local newspaper reviews, which began to cover the movie playing a particular house first and then the stage show with which it shared the week. If there were portents for the future in this state of affairs, Powell appeared in no apparent rush to battle his way into a new career — that is until he was given further proof of the tenuousness of the vaudevillian’s existence.

This sobering lesson came Powell’s way in the form of a musicians’ strike that for some fifteen weeks closed out stage shows in all of Pittsburgh’s theaters. Powell, with his play-or-pay contract, may have been out of a job but not out of a salary. The question was what to do with him between September 15 and December 24, 1931, when a settlement of the strike brought back live entertainment to the Stanley. Warner Brothers’ answer was to send him, together with other Pittsburgh favorites, to theaters elsewhere in Pennsylvania as well as in Missouri and West Virginia. By way of example, Dick Powell and company were the first vaudevillians to play at Erie’s Warner Theater, opened only the previous April.

But possibly the most successful — certainly the longest booking — was at the Ambassador Theater in St. Louis. Together with Bernie Armstrong, the Stanley organist, and Dorothy Bushey, later Mrs. Armstrong, Powell delighted audiences for five weeks beginning October 23. Then it was on to the Virginia Theater in Charleston,

26 See Martin interview, Oct. 9, 1981.
27 Quoted in Current Biography 1948 (New York), 503.
28 Powell, together with a Pittsburgh contingent, appeared in Erie Sept. 26-30 and again Dec. 6-12. Announcements in the Erie Daily Times indicate he would function as the master of ceremonies for the December show.
West Virginia, for a split week beginning November 29. With Powell were more Stanley favorites, like him, committed to playing suburban houses throughout Warner Brothers' Pittsburgh zone until the strike was over. At the very least, the experience gave Powell a taste once again of the frenetic life of a vaudevillian and of what it meant to be "an added attraction" competing for audiences in Depression-wracked America.

Especially, he must have been aware of the species of despair gripping vaudevillians as once-bright sketches deteriorated and as untalented performers — because they would work cheap — were favored by zone bookers over proven professionals. And Powell was in a position to observe that old vaudeville routines were turning up in talking film shorts or on radio — often without credit being given to those with whom they had been identified on the vaudeville stage. But perhaps the most pressing of the realities that barnstorming brought home was the course of action increasingly favored by theater owners and zone managers — to do away with stage shows, thus saving 75 percent of a given theater's overhead as the many costs of lighting, scenery, and booking were done away with. Eliminated, too, were the salaries of stagehands and musicians, not to mention emcees, like Powell, for whom there was no longer a need.

Certainly, on his return to the Stanley he must have been aware that movie palace stage shows were increasingly an anachronism, but for the moment, the world in which he held a privileged place claimed his allegiance. Take the week beginning February 13. The stage show, titled "Revue of Song, Dance and Fun," included performers to whom he could relate and with whom he could have fun: the Three Swifts, Indian club jugglers, and the Darling Twins, who sang and danced. Also, Joe and Jane McKenna with their roughneck dance sketch. The boyishness in Powell so apparent to his Pittsburgh friends must have reveled in the presence of these troupers as it surely did in the parade of performers who graced the Stanley's stage in the months to come. Among many: Worthy and Thomas, tap dancers; Annie, Judie, and Zeke, hillbilly singers; Serge Flash, juggler; Britt Wood, harmonica player, together with Pansy, the educated comedy horse, and Lobo II, the dog with a human brain.

One performer who made a profound impression was Buddy Rogers. Not only did Powell sing various of Rogers's vocal numbers

29 The 75 percent figure is supplied by Jack Robinson in "8-Big Acts-8: A Glance Backwards," *Marquee* 9 (First Quarter, 1977): 3-6. Robinson, a member of the Theatre Historical Society, is perhaps that organization's most knowledgeable member where vaudeville is concerned.
— like "You Can Make My Life a Bed of Roses" — but he was intrigued by one of Rogers's routines in which the headliner played "all" the instruments in the band. That it caught Powell's fancy is suggested by his opening the March 4 show by standing up in the pit and playing first the sax, then the banjo, and finally the clarinet — "to the satisfaction of all." In point of fact, he might have battled to take his act out on the circuits had not Hollywood beckoned toward the close of April 1932.

Just who was responsible for the opportunity that came Powell's way is not altogether clear. It may have been John H. Harris, of Ice Capades fame, then the zone manager, or it may have been a now forgotten Warner Brothers scout who wandered into the Stanley, heard Powell sing, and then dispatched an excited telegram to California. The result of that wire, or of Harris's sponsorship, led to a screen test in March 1932 at the Vitaphone Studios in Brooklyn, New York. Before seeing it, Rufus LaMaire, casting director for Warner Brothers, had contemplated assigning Powell a role in a film titled *The Crooner*. On viewing the test, however, LaMaire allotted the "over anxious" Powell a less demanding role in *Blessed Event*. True, there was only one line for Powell to speak, but three songs went with the part of a down-and-out crooner. One of these — "Sweethearts Forever" — launched Powell's career as a "movie heartthrobber."

During the four weeks it took to make the film, Powell was on a leave of absence from the Stanley. And it was to that theater he returned the week beginning May 20 to emcee a stage show titled "Fine Feathers." Prophetically, the week's film was billed above the live show, but Powell's loyal fans were scarcely sensitive to the implications of this circumstance. They were on hand to hear the latest 30 J. L. Garrison, a Pittsburgh contemporary, recalls that Powell's friends dissuaded him from touring the vaudeville circuits with an act whose climax came when Powell, as bandleader, put down his baton and took to performing a succession of musical instruments. Friends in both Indianapolis and Pittsburgh describe his musicianship as "modest."

31 Harold Cohen in an article titled "Local Boy," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Apr. 29, 1933, gives Harris the credit. The same point is made in "Appearances Here Put Dick Powell on the Road to Fame," *Pittsburgh Press*, Jan. 3, 1963. Brian McDonald, a movie palace emcee who followed Powell into the Enright, tells the author that an agent named Harry Fitzgerald came to town, heard Powell sing, and recommended him to Hollywood. Fitzgerald may have been the Warner Brothers' scout referred to in a *Press* article, "Pittsburgh's Dick Powell a Hit in Straight Roles," Apr. 2, 1933. The writer maintains the scout wandered into the Stanley and after hearing Powell sing, sent an excited wire to the casting director at Warner Brothers.

32 His contract at the Stanley ran until July 1. In addition to the musicians strike, this was one of a number of professional absences from the
songs, the newest wisecracks, and the latest gossip of Hollywood. Powell obliged them that week and in the weeks to come, that is until the week beginning June 10, when he presided over the final stage show of the season.

Afterwards, he was Hollywood-bound again, destined to appear in more than thirty musicals in the next thirteen years. Films like *Cowboy from Brooklyn* (1938), *Going Places* (1938), and *Naughty But Nice* (1939), made toward the close of his association with Warner Brothers, are at best tedious, if not insipid, fare. However, it was Powell’s good fortune at the very outset to be featured in what movie historians number among the finest musicals made at Warner Brothers — *42nd Street, Gold Diggers of 1933, and Footlight Parade* — all released in 1933. Of course, it was not Powell’s presence that made them “amazing pieces of entertainment” but rather the kaleidoscopic production numbers of Busby Berkeley. Nevertheless, they were a boost to his career, launching him on the road to being the epitome of the Warner musical of the 1930s. But, by the end of the decade, these delightful confections had lost their vibrancy and fun. Once again Powell must have sensed he was linked with an anachronism.

Fully aware that he was at a career crossroads, Powell began importuning Warner Brothers to cast him in straight dramatic roles. Then, in the face of the studio’s reluctance to do so, he purchased his contract release. Subsequently, he signed with Paramount, only to find the roles offered him were again singing juveniles. Determined to break out of the stereotype, Powell lobbied hard in 1944 to get the lead in James M. Cain’s *Double Indemnity*. When Paramount turned him down, he quit the studio, signing with RKO only after they agreed to his playing the crudely cynical detective in the 1945 screen version of Raymond Chandler’s *Farewell, My Lovely*, which was released as *Murder, My Sweet*. Audiences took to the “tough” Powell, for he was wonderfully convincing as the glib, sardonic Philip Marlowe.

So, too did Edward Dmytryk, the film’s director. In his autobiography Dmytryk speaks of trying to work the actor into his charac-

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Stanley. Following his debut at that theater in Nov. 1929, he returned to the Enright for an engagement on Aug. 8, 1930. Apparently he was in such demand in East Liberty that he did not return downtown until the week beginning Feb. 20, 1931. East Liberty audiences saw him again for a week in Jan. 1932 and for two weeks in February. Then, on April 21, he said his first farewell to Pittsburgh audiences from the stage of the Stanley.

ter only to be told, "Eddie, just tell me what to do, and I'll do it." 34 More than that, he accepted direction "competently and effortlessly." Indeed, in "Eddie's" judgment, Powell comes closer to the essence of Marlowe's character than Humphrey Bogart, Richard Montgomery, and Robert Mitchum — other distinguished portrayers of Chandler's fictional creation. By way of explanation, Dmytryk wrote, "I wanted Marlowe played as I believed Chandler visualized him — really an Eagle Scout, a do-gooder, with a patina of toughness only skin deep." 35 The director goes on to identify this "good-guy" characterization with Powell himself; and if his point is valid, it suggests interesting affinities between the tough detective and the stage show emcee.

Powell may never have gotten "all the hay out of his hair" on the movie palace stage or on the Hollywood back lot, but that circumstance was no deterrent to his being one of the first of Hollywood's star personalities to embrace television as a medium, becoming not only a television actor but a producer and executive — president of the prestigious Four Star Productions. Quite evidently his was a talent for all seasons. The point is surely worth making, but the Powell we are most apt to remember is not the dramatic actor-businessman, but that friendly, ambitious young fellow, that fine, decent, and wholesome youngster — full of life and fun — who is with us whenever the classic films of the 1930s are revived.

The Dick Powell who won twenty million sweethearts nationally was crafted and polished on the stages of the Enright and Stanley theaters between 1929 and 1932. Audiences remember him as they do no other performer of his vintage on the Pittsburgh scene. In their memories he is boyish and clean-cut, blythe and ingratiating. They could and did have fun with him for the evening at least, believed that they too could succeed with hard work and diligence and a little good luck. But then it was his particular genius to make a generation experience anew from week to week the possibilities as well as the fun of being young and healthy. 36 Then, when he moved on, he left his fans with a song about painting the clouds with sunshine. They may not have tried to do so but, remembering Powell, they believed they might have done just that.

34 Quoted in It's a Hell of a Life But Not a Bad Living (New York, 1978), 60.
35 Ibid.
36 "Young and Healthy" was the title of a production number in 42nd Street featuring Powell.
IN COMMEMORATION

GIFT

IN HONOR OF

MRS. JAY GOLDSTEIN

FROM

MR. AND MRS. JAMES H. KLINGENSmidt