



OCTOBER 1980

## PETER ALLEN

**W**hen a rock show passed through the small town of Tenterfield, Australia in the late fifties, Peter Allen would happily have launched his show business career then and there: "It was like the circus coming; my parents had to lock me up in my room to make sure I didn't run away with them. I just sat in my room and cried and tried to tear the door down . . ."

His course was set even earlier than that. "I could sing before I could walk, and when I was about nine, my mother used to take me to the pubs on Saturday afternoon. The men would drink in the bar, and I'd play the piano in the lounge while the ladies sang all the old songs." He'd skip school to take in movies, especially musicals. When his father died when he was 14, he left school and with his mother moved to another small town, Lismore, to live with relatives. He took a job in a men's shop, constantly fell asleep behind the counter, and when he discovered he could make twice as much singing in pubs, promptly quit.

As the great wave of rock 'n roll hit Australia, he found inspiration in Little Richard and Elvis Presley. "I was doing this weird act of old songs people wanted to hear, then I'd jump up, kick away the stool and launch into 'Rip It Up.'" He read a newspaper ad that said Surfers Paradise, a glamorous resort about a hundred miles away, was crying out for entertainers and new talent, so he quietly withdrew his funds from the bank, hopped a bus, auditioned and was hired to perform in several clubs and hotels. "Pat Boone had just come out with his song about white bucks, and I was desperately searching for a pair to wear in my act, but of course there were none in Australia. The only white shoes they had were cricket shoes which are somewhat unwieldy. Little Richard used to kick his foot up on the piano, but he was working with grand pianos, I was working with uprights. I had to kick much higher and sometimes these shoes would fly right out into the audience."

The Two Shades, another act he'd played with at Surfers Paradise, were booked to appear on the new Australian Bandstand TV show, but at the last minute one of the Shades decided he'd rather go back to cutting sugar cane. The group's manager, the father of the other Shade, Chris Bell, suggested using "that strange boy who stands up and kicks his shoes into the audience." Chris was less than enthralled, but Peter got the job anyway. "It was a free trip to Sydney where I'd never been," he recalls, "and I figured it would probably last about a week. I never felt any fear about going to cities; I thought they'd be expecting me."

The appearance on TV was a disaster, but the new team—Chris and Peter Allen as they billed themselves—stuck together under the tutelage of Chris' father. The two young men wound up as regulars on Australian Bandstand. They even had a Top Ten hit, "My Secret."

Shortly afterwards, Chris & Peter Allen left Australia to tour the Orient. "We played Tokyo and Okinawa, then got an offer to go to South Korea which was not my idea of a good time. The minute I got my first smell of foreign lands, I went quite crazy and fell madly in love with the whole Orient. There was a wonderful last-of-the-Empire feeling then, and we went from geisha houses in Tokyo and waterfront dives in Hong Kong gradually building our way up to the Hiltons."

While they were booked into the Hong Kong Hilton, Judy Garland arrived in town after a disastrous tour of Australia and underwent an emergency tracheotomy. Her traveling companion, actor Mark Herron, wandered up to the hotel, caught the act and returned to the hospital to tell her about his discovery. "Judy said: 'How dare you go out and have a fabulous time when I'm lying here dying!' And with that, she jumped out of bed, wrapped a scarf around her wounded neck, put on a big hat and appeared at the Hilton.

"She clapped and laughed and went crazy for the whole act. Afterwards, she came over and said: 'You're so wonderful, you're just like Fred Astaire.' The only thing I'd seen Fred Astaire in was *On the Beach*, and he was already about 50, and I thought that was an awful thing to say. I had no idea he even danced. Anyway, Judy decided that she liked me and I would be their best friend while they were in Hong Kong."

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On their first night on the town, the threesome ferried across the lagoon to an after hours club, and were rowed back to Hong Kong on a small boat. "Judy said: 'Sing something' and I said, 'Well, no, I don't sing alone, I only sing harmonies with that other boy.' She said: 'You're a singer, sing.' So I sang a song and she said: 'You have a wonderful voice,' and I thought, the lady's quite mad. I didn't think I could sing at all, but she loved the song so much she asked me to sing it again. By the time we finally landed, the sun was up and we went on and on and on . . ."

Miss Garland and her companion decided to accompany their new best friend aboard the liner President Roosevelt, Peter's main headquarters for three years between dates, to Tokyo where he and Chris were scheduled to appear at the Hilton during the '64 Olympics. She remained in Tokyo for their opening night, then flew off to England, and shortly thereafter called to ask if Peter and Chris would like to open her show in London. They accepted.

"All along, Judy'd been telling me how much I'd love her daughter Liza. She was in London to do Judy & Liza at the Palladium, and met us at the plane when we arrived. She was 18 and so cute. The first night Judy took us to the Ad Lib Discotheque, and we sat with the Beatles, Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev, but I had jet lag and fell asleep. The next night I fell asleep at Noel Coward's, and the following night, after playing the piano while Judy and Vivian Leigh sang 'Hello Dolly' at George Sanders' country home, I fell asleep again.

"One thing led to another, and Liza and I were going around together. She asked me if I'd like to go to Paris to meet her father who was directing *The Sandpiper* there. Vincent Minnelli invited us to lunch—they were also shooting *What's New Pussycat* at the same studio—and we sat down to lunch with Richard Burton, Elizabeth Taylor, Peter O'Toole, Woody Allen, Paula Prentiss and Ursula Andress. I was getting a crash course in Celebrity."

It was to continue for some time: Peter and Liza were engaged and Chris & Peter Allen continued opening shows for Judy Garland in Miami and Las Vegas "and various concerts around the country, some of which she appeared at and some of which she didn't, but we always went on."

Chris & Peter Allen appeared on the Tonight Show, received a standing ovation for "A Man and a Woman," and were signed on the air by Johnny Carson for 20 more shows. They picked up a following in the Midwest, put out an album on Mercury, but Peter began feeling his career was sliding toward oblivion.

"I was already locked into a nightclub format, literally singing 'The Impossible Dream' every night. Then I saw Laura Nyro at the Troubadour, and it was the first time I'd seen anyone come out alone on the piano. I thought how incredible it would be just to sing your own songs. It was the time of Randy Newman and Nilsson; Joni Mitchell was just starting, and I began to feel maybe there was something I could do."

His marriage to Liza broke up, and that split gave him the momentum to split with Chris Bell. He began writing songs in earnest, gave up the uptown scene, and began singing at The Bitter End in Greenwich Village.

He took some of his songs to Metromedia, and was signed as a staff writer, and began collaborating with his longtime friend, Carole Bayer Sager. He was signed as an artist on Metromedia Records and put out two albums, including the collector's item, *Tenterfield Saddler*. On weekends, he'd work the Hamptons for the New York crowd, but the coffeehouse era was nearly over, and there weren't any intimate spots available to showcase the new Peter Allen.

Bette Midler opened with dazzling success at the Continental Baths, the New York in-crowd began flooding the venue, and Peter was booked in to follow "The Divine Miss M." "For the first time, I had a band behind me, drums and a bass, and I felt an incredible sense of freedom. Instead of being locked behind the piano singing my songs of love gone wrong, all of a sudden I was up dancing and the audience seemed to like it." He opened for Bette Midler at the Troubadour and decided to move to L.A.

In the early seventies, a club called Reno Sweeney opened in the Village and word got around that most of the performers appearing there were singing Peter Allen songs, which amazed Peter Allen. "I couldn't believe they'd even know where to find my songs to sing." When he opened at Reno Sweeney, it was as a kind of Crowned Prince. "It was the first time I understood exactly what I was doing. You could go there in jeans or in a tuxedo, as a date—and it didn't matter what your date was. When I sang 'I Honestly Love You' the strangest combinations would start gravitating toward each other."



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Metromedia Records folded, but Kip Cohen, A&M vice president of A&R, got wind of what was happening at Reno Sweeney, dropped down to catch Peter, and flew him out to Hollywood to play for A&M executives. He was signed by the label and his first album, *Continental American*, which included his own song, "Just Ask Me I've Been There," and a song he co-authored with Jeff Barry, "I Honestly Love You," was released in the autumn of '74. "I Honestly Love You" copped a Grammy as Best Record of the Year, and Olivia Newton-John sailed in as Best Female Vocalist of the Year. He toured the U.S., Australia and the Orient with Helen Reddy, and in 1975 released his second A&M album, *Taught By Experts*. It included "I Go to Rio", a song he wrote with Adrienne Anderson, which became a hit in France, Australia and Brazil, as well as "Quiet Please, There's A Lady Onstage," his haunting remembrance of a very special friend, Judy Garland.

When Peter opened at The Bottom Line, manager Dee Anthony came three nights in a row. "He said everybody he brought loved me, he told me he knew where I belonged and wanted to be my manager. And in one year, I've gone from 30 people in Philadelphia to 10,000 people in Central Park."

*It Is Time for Peter Allen*, was a culmination of his sold-out performances at The Bottom Line and Avery Fisher Hall in New York and the Roxy in L.A.

And as *Bi-coastal* will make vividly clear both to his ardent fans and new admirers, Peter Allen occupies a very special place in contemporary music.

And happily, we're all the richer for it.