



Take It from the Big Mouth: The Life of Martha Raye

Jean Maddern Pitrone

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"She was one of the world's four best comediennes," said Milton Berle, "but she lived a life of personal disaster." Martha Raye sang, danced, and joked her way into the spotlight of the entertainment world with a career that spanned seven decades and encompassed everything from vaudeville to television commercials to entertaining U.S. troops.

Take It from the Big Mouth, the first full-fledged biography of the multi-talented performer, explores Raye's life and career with candor and insight. Raye got her big break when she caught the attention of a film director as she kidded with audience members Joe E. Lewis and Jimmy Durante during an engagement at the Trocadero in Hollywood. In the late 1930s, Raye appeared in a number of films, and the press heralded her as a "stridently funny comedienne with a Mammoth Cave mouth." From there her career soared. She landed a role in Charlie Chaplain's film *Monsieur Verdoux*, and the *New York Post* commented that Raye was the only one who could hold her own with the comic master. By the 1950s she hosted her own highly rated television show, reaching millions with her clowning.

Behind the huge smile and raucous laugh, though, there was a darker side to Martha Raye. She found solace from her insecurities and a frenzied schedule in the use of drugs and alcohol. Her seven rocky marriages, the last to a man 33 years her junior whom she had known less than two weeks, fueled headlines and gossip columns. Particularly painful was her turbulent relationship with her only daughter, Melodye.

She was passionately committed to entertaining troops abroad during World War II, and she worked tirelessly as both entertainer and nurse in the remote jungles of Vietnam. Bob Hope commented that "she was Florence Nightingale, Dear Abby, and the only singer who could be heard over the artillery fire." The Green Berets designated her an honorary lieutenant colonel, and she later received the Presidential Medal of Freedom. After her death in 1994, "Colonel Maggie" became the only civilian laid to rest among the Green Berets at the Fort Bragg military cemetery.

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