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MAGAZINE

Guido Salmaggi



Singing America's Praises Guido Salmaggi

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INSIDE



Salmaggi as "The Boss" at Spats

6 at night, I'm going to sing *The Star-Spangled Banner* at the Great Hall of the Hyatt Regency Hotel near the water-fall."

Whew! That's a lot of "Oh, say, can you see?" and "by the dawn's early lights" for just one day. But Salmaggi wouldn't miss a minute of it. As he sits down at lunch to discuss his star-spangled life over a tender baked mahimahi at the canoe club's dining room, you get the feeling he'd sing the song 10 more times on the Fourth of July if he had enough time and someone would just ask.

It's not that he's one of those loud, boisterous guys who would grab a microphone anywhere he could find one just to relive the past or show off how well he's maintained his vocal chords. Salmaggi is actually quite softspoken, preferring instead to behave as a gentleman who has lived a long life and enjoyed a long career in the arts.

But the elder opera star does admit to having a little prosciutto (ham) in him, and he still loves to sing at special occasions. He comes off as a man who has been singing the national anthem at baseball games for 40 years because he's one of those guys who dearly loves his country and everything the song represents.

"I started singing *The Star-Spangled Banner* in 1937 at Ebbets Field in Brooklyn for the Brooklyn Dodgers, and I've been singing it ever since," he says proudly, putting his fork down and ignor-

There are also very few people who have led a story-book life like Salmaggi's. As one of nine children born to Italian immigrants, he was raised on the streets of Brooklyn, where he grew up playing "punchball" with the likes of Danny Kaye, Alan King and Robert Merrill. Even today, despite his former training in voice, many of his words are punctuated with the accent from his neighborhood.

"Our part of Brooklyn was Jewish, Irish and Italian," he remembers, returning to his fish and talking between mouthfuls. "We used to fight each other and call each other the worst names, but if any one of us got in trouble in those days, one would help the other immediately. It was a beautiful way of life then — not like today, where everybody hates each other and all that violence and drugs and stuff."

As a teen-ager, Salmaggi took voice and studied Italian in order to pursue a career in opera. His father, Alfredo, was an opera producer in New York, and Salmaggi says he was the originator of popular-priced opera in America, introducing many singers who later became stars at the Metropolitan Opera. He says his father also was the first opera impresario to introduce black singers to America's opera stage (circa 1933).

"My father was a tall, very handsome man," he says fondly. "He looked like Clark Gable. And my mother was a beautiful blond-haired, blue-eyed girl from Northern Italy."



Planting a Kiss on Maria



During a WWII USO show

and we went all over the island auditioning people.

"We found guys like Alan Ludden, Carl Reiner, Hal David, Werner Klemperer (remember Sgt. Schultz?), Howard Morris, Sam Wanamaker, Farley Granger, Ernie Flatt, Joe DiMaggio, Dickie Moore. We had about 15 or 20 guys in the section, and we did shows for five years throughout the Pacific on all these little islands you couldn't even land on."

Salmaggi's contacts didn't stop at show business, either. He soon became a good friend to the Pacific Fleet commander, Adm. Chester W. Nimitz, for whom he arranged entertainment, and sang tenor for dignitaries who came in from Washington. "I was known as Adm. Nimitz's favorite tenor, and after the shows, he would bring me in the kitchen where I would cook spaghetti. We would eat in the kitchen around midnight after everyone had left."

It was a relationship that would inadvertently solidify another relationship for Salmaggi. On a United Service Organization tour to the Mainland, arranged for him by Nimitz so he could go to New York to see his mother, he rendezvoused with a girlfriend in Hollywood, named Nancy Stair. He married her a day later, enjoyed a one-day honeymoon and then returned to Hawaii. It was February 1944, and the war ended later that year.

After his discharge from the

a turn out west — way out west. One morning in 1959, the director of the Honolulu Symphony looked him up while in New York for some help in producing opera in Hawaii. Salmaggi jumped at the chance and for the next five years did all the lead-role casting for the Honolulu Symphony Opera as its artistic advisor. He flew to Honolulu for two weeks during every production while maintaining his career in New York.

Then in 1969, Mayor Frank Fasi hired him to be the city and county's director of auditoriums and moved him to Hawaii. The position was short-lived, though, as Salmaggi walked off the job, disgruntled over administrative interference. "It became a political thing, and I resigned because I didn't like politics," he says matter-of-factly.

Despite his rift with the city, Salmaggi's government career was only beginning. Gov. John Burns asked him if he would consider being the vice consul to Italy for the state of Hawaii. Salmaggi agreed to an interview and soon found himself in front of the consul general in San Francisco.

"I walked into this board room, and I saw all these little baldheaded Italians and said, 'Oh boy, this is going to be trouble,'" he recalls, letting out a long chuckle. "Well, I spoke to them and I told them: 'Look,

the owner and manager of the restaurant. During his career as a singer, Salmaggi sang in opera companies that toured nationally on television, radio and Broadway. He did *The Ed Sullivan Show* years ago, and he has sung duets numerous times with his close friend Beverly Sills, who grew up with him in Brooklyn. He also keeps in touch with old friends like Placido Domingo, Luciano Pavarotti, Robert Merrill, Alan King and Carl Reiner, to name a few.

But memories of singing are not good enough for Salmaggi. He still sings Gounod's *Ave Maria* at weddings and special Masses, and the one thing that continues to put the pizzaz in his life today is singing *The Star-Spangled Banner*. Believe it or not, he says he has never accepted a nickel for singing the song because he considers it a privilege.

"He is so patriotic that singing the national anthem is like medicine to him," says Maria, who supports his singing at ball games and often travels with him. "It's invigorating to him and seems to keep him fit. It's an important part of his life."

Salmaggi says *The Star-Spangled Banner* is extremely difficult to perform, and like many other singing artists in the country, he agrees the national anthem should be changed to *America the Beautiful*, a less violent and much easier song to sing. But his reverence for the current anthem remains unshakable, and he strongly prefers that those who sing it for the public do so in a traditional style.

"I'm a traditional guy, and I don't like to hear a rock 'n' roller or someone else do it in their style because it wasn't written that way. A lot of people just don't do justice to it. It's like putting a moustache on Mona Lisa."

As difficult as the song may be, Salmaggi says he's never forgotten the words in all the times he's sung it, and he stopped counting after 4,000 performances. He has made a deal with Maria that on the day he does forget the words, he'll hang it up. Until then, his love affair with the song continues.

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