

COVER STORY

Guido Salmaggi

# A Star-Spangled Italian

Guido Salmaggi, America's most patriotic tenor, sings our national anthem every chance he gets

By MARK DOYLE

When Guido Salmaggi makes an entrance into the Outrigger Canoe Club in Waikiki, it doesn't take long to pick him out from the other members and guests. Wearing a cool white "Acapulco" shirt, beige slacks, soft leather loafers and a magnificent tan, he strolls through the lobby looking like a movie star who has aged like a fine Italian wine.

The thick wavy hair is still there, peppered just right with gray. And the handsome Hollywood face and flashing white teeth are still there, too, making his 72 years look more like 50. But the most important gift he still possesses is the voice. The same classical tenor voice that made its 1939 professional debut in New York City when Salmaggi, age 20, sang the leading role of Alfredo in Verdi's *La Traviata*. It's also the same voice that has entertained nine American presidents and countless baseball fans in every major-league ballpark in the country with a robust rendition of *The Star-Spangled Banner*.

Though long-retired from the opera stage, Salmaggi is still very much in demand to sing the national anthem for major-league baseball games, with dates coming up in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. He also is going to be one of the busiest entertainers in the state as Hawaii joins the rest of the nation in celebrating Independence Day.

"For the Fourth of July, I have to sing on the radio — KSSK, I think, Perry and Price," he says, thinking ahead to the holiday. "They're going to call me in the morning at 7, and I'm going to do *The Star-Spangled Banner* live on the telephone.

"Then at 8, I go down to the Moana Hotel and sing *The Star-Spangled Banner* for the McFarland Regatta. Then, at 6 at night, I'm going to sing *The Star-Spangled Banner* at the Great Hall of the Hyatt Regency Hotel near the waterfront.

"Whew! That's a lot of 'Oh, say, can you see?' and 'by the dawn's early light' 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.

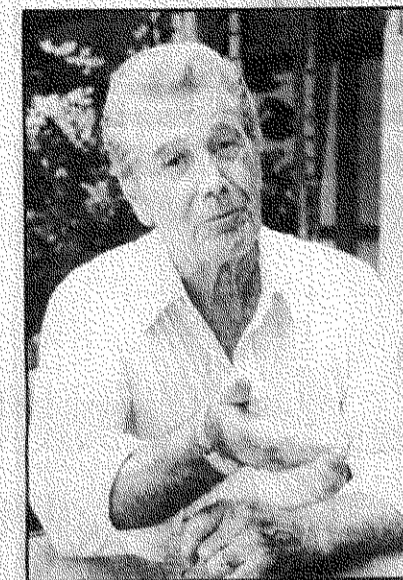
But the elder opera star does admit to having a little proscutto (ham) in him, and he still loves to sing at special occasions. He comes off as a man who has been singing the national anthem at baseball games for 40 years because he's one of those guys who dearly loves his country and everything the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

ing his mahimahi so he can continue.

"Another highlight of my life is that I've sung the national anthem for the last nine presidents, starting with Roosevelt and ending up with Reagan," he adds quickly. "When I was a soldier boy, I sang for Roosevelt at the Queen's Surf. I'll never forget that because it was Roosevelt, Nimitz and MacArthur standing right there, and there I was, trembling to death."

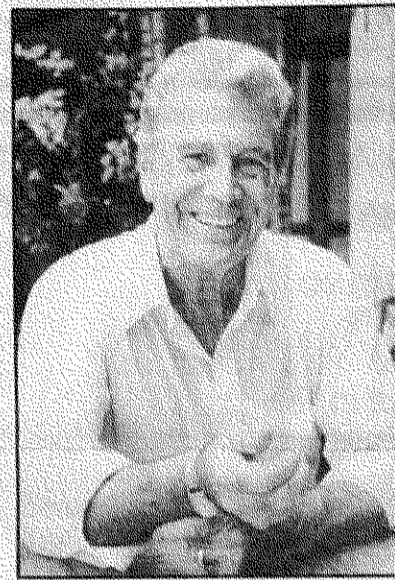
One of Salmaggi's remaining goals is to sing the anthem for George Bush, which would make it an even 10 presidents. He says his good friend, Rep. Patricia Saiki, is working to set up the engagement, as is Barbara Bush, for whom he



"I wouldn't give up my American citizenship for all the money in Italy."

Salmaggi's opera career was interrupted almost as soon as it began, however. Shortly after his debut in *La Traviata*, he was drafted into the Army and sent to North Carolina for basic training. It was 1941 and the Japanese struck Pearl Harbor just as he was being shipped overseas from San Francisco. Salmaggi spent the rest of the war as an entertainer in the Pacific.

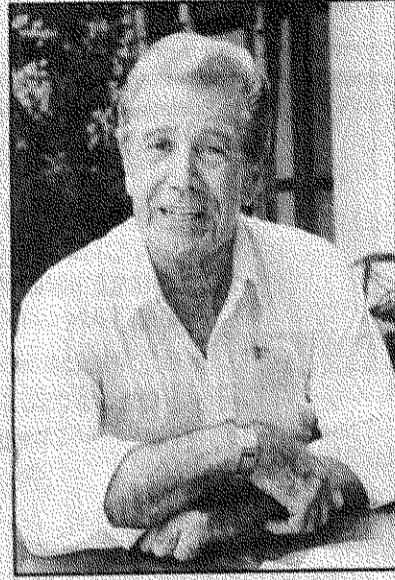
"Before I knew it, they took me out of the infantry and put me in a special department called the Entertainment Section of the Pacific," he says, reflecting back to his arrival in Hawaii. "In this section was Maurice Evans, a famed Shakespearean actor. He and I were the only guys in there,



"I started singing 'The Star-Spangled Banner' in 1937."

Army. Salmaggi returned to Nancy and Hollywood, where he stayed for two years under contract with RKO Pictures. "Nothing ever happened; I don't know why," he said. "I couldn't even work in nightclubs or anywhere else because of the contract. So I went back to New York and did radio and television for a few years."

After a singing stint as soloist with the glee club at Radio City Music Hall, he decided to enter his father's profession, producing grand opera, and in 1955 he formed the Brooklyn Opera Company, which he ran successfully for 10 years. He and one of his brothers, Felix, also put together the first New York



"When I was a soldier boy, I sang for Roosevelt at the Queen's Surf."

sang the anthem last year at a luncheon.

"When I sing for them, I'll close the book on presidents," he adds with a smile. "Ten presidents ... There are very few people who can say that."

There are also very few people who have led a storybook 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."



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



Salmaggi as "The Boss" at Spats

I'm most honored to be considered for this post. But I want you to know I'm an American first and then an Italian. Well, I figured this would probably kick me out of the room, but they applauded that."

He was given the position and went on to serve as the vice consul to Italy in the state of Hawaii for the next 23 years. At one point, the Italian government offered him a career position at \$40,000 a year, but he turned it down because it would have meant leaving Hawaii and giving up his American citizenship. "I told 'em I wouldn't give up my American citizenship for all the money in Italy," he says.

Unfortunately, he does finally have to relinquish his role as vice consul. Italy requires mandatory retirement for its foreign consuls at age 70, and a new vice consul will be installed in Hawaii this summer. Salmaggi says he is very saddened by having to leave his Italian post, but he is extremely proud to have served both countries so well and for so long.

In the meantime, Salmaggi is enjoying his 30th year living in Honolulu. He remarried in 1979, several years after his beloved wife of 30 years, Nancy, passed away. He and his present wife, Maria, now share a 12th-floor condominium just a few doors from the Outrigger Canoe Club near Diamond Head, and Linda, his only daughter (from his first marriage), lives in Kaha-

la. "My wife, Maria, is a very attractive woman. She was born in New York but raised in Italy, and we have a beautiful life together here," Salmaggi boasts, obviously very much in love. The two of them also own a home in Sarasota, Fla., where they spend several months a year.

In between baseball games, he keeps busy with a number of projects, not the least of which is his part-time job as "The Boss" at Spats, the mobster-theme restaurant and disco at the Hyatt Regency where he has worked for more than 10 years. Salmaggi dresses up three nights a week in Capone-era outfits, complete with spats, as he acts as

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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