

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION, by Ed Birnbryer	<i>v</i>
FOREWORD, by Leonard B. Smith	<i>vii</i>
OVERTURE, by Mayhew "Mike" Lake	<i>xi</i>
Chapter I Land of the Pilgrim's Pride	1
Chapter II Good-bye, Shoe Factory!	8
Chapter III We Knock 'em in the Aisles	13
Chapter IV Turkey in the Sticks (A "First" writes home to his Ma)	23
Chapter V Trouping with Repertoire Shows	30
Chapter VI Summer Parks, Barnstorming with a Minstrel Show	40
Chapter VII Burlesque before D. D. T.	51
Chapter VIII New York (Veni, Vedi—forget it!)	61
Chapter IX What killed Vaudeville?	69
Chapter X The first Movie Theaters	73
Chapter XI Roxy inaugurates the first great Motion-Picture Theatre	81
Chapter XII Musical Shows	88
Chapter XIII George M. Cohan	97
Chapter XIV Victor Herbert	104
Chapter XV Henry Hadley	110
Chapter XVI John Philip Sousa	114
Chapter XVII Arthur Pryor	120
Chapter XVIII Edwin Franko Goldman	123
Chapter XIX Concert Bands	126
Chapter XX Radio, the early Days	132
Chapter XXI Critics and Teachers	140
Chapter XXII The American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers	145
Chapter XXIII The New Generation	150
Coda	155
REFLECTIONS , by Suzanne Lake DeVos	157
INDEX	166

INTRODUCTION

The author of "*Great Guys*" and I never met, purely by accident. The chances are very good that Mayhew Lake and I passed one another on numerous occasions in and around the Radio City area of New York City—he on his way to a rehearsal or broadcast, I on my way to my office in the RCA Building and a staff writing job at the National Broadcasting Company.

Or, it might have been at or near the Roxy Theatre, where Mayhew "Mike" Lake supervised orchestral composition and arrangements for the fabled S.L. Rothafel—Roxy—and for whom I had written two presentations, one of them a stage version of the popular NBC radio show, "Chamber Music Society of Lower Basin Street."

We each knew and worked with many of the leading studio and theatre musicians of that busy era, as well as musical directors such as Paul Lavalle, Joseph Littau and others.

It is difficult to pin down dates since Mr. Lake, curiously, appears reluctant to give any in his charming and interesting book. Matter of fact, he doesn't even tell us when he was born nor does he tell us exactly where. A little digging unearthed his birthdate as October 25, 1879 and his birthplace as Southville, Massachusetts. Mayhew Lake died at Palisades, New Jersey on March 16, 1955 at the age of 76.

A prolific composer and arranger whose body of work is numbered in the hundreds, Mike Lake is perhaps best known for his "Evolution Of Dixie," which is still a feature on many band and orchestral programs throughout the world.

He attended music school in Brockton, Massachusetts and was an honored graduate of the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. A violinist in the Boston Symphony, Lake also played piano and "dabbled" in brass instruments.

His book was called to my attention by Leonard B. Smith, former cornet soloist with the Goldman Band and conductor of the well-known Detroit Concert Band. Leonard was also one of Mayhew Lake's students and it was his intention to publish the book for limited distribution, thus assuring that the memoirs would not be packed away in an old trunk and

lost for all time. I was asked to proof-read the galleys of the initial printing, which I did, and as I read through the sheets I became more and more certain that Mike Lake's book, dealing as it does with one of the most exciting and productive times in modern music-making in this country, deserved to be exposed to a wider readership.

The book required considerable editing and reshaping, to be sure. But the "meat" was there and has been retained intact, along with an inimitable "up front" style—corny humor and all.

It is a book of strong opinions about the music profession and contains revealing insights into all facets of show business as they apply to the making of music and the people who make it.

You will find no philosophical depths being plumbed in these pages and no big messages contained herein. But you may be assured of a relaxing, enjoyable experience with a book you really *can* lay down. . .and pick up. . .again and again and again.

Ed Birnbryer
Editor

FOREWORD

Mike Lake was one of my idols. Long before I met him, I would see the phrase, "Arr. by M. L. Lake" at the upper right hand corner of much of the music I played.

I first met him in 1933 at the Ernest Williams Band Camp in the Catskills. He would drive all the way up from his Fort Lee, New Jersey home in his big Stanley Steamer touring car, just to give us lessons in arranging. He appeared so dapper to us, especially with that car and the way he would saunter on up to the main building with five or six students tagging along . . . I think we figured something might rub off on us just by doing that.

He used no text books, just the blackboard. The only thing he exacted from his students was their interest—and occasionally, cigarettes when he would run out of his. At the winter school in Brooklyn, he would get so involved and interested in the students that a 50 minute class would run 2½ to 3 hours. It would only be terminated after Mr. Williams would telephone Mike to, "Get those boys over here. I have a cook waiting with a hot dinner for them". Mike would hail a taxicab, pile us all in and whisk us back the 3 miles to the dormitory building on Ocean Avenue, giving the driver a handsome tip, meanwhile still talking arranging.

His "American Band Arranger" which we all owned gave us the factual information we needed concerning the peculiarities, ranges and limits of the various instruments. Oddly, he never even suggested we get it but we all had it!

It was later, at his home that he and I would sit up all hours of the night talking music and exploring music. He had the intensity and vibrancy of youth, yet he was my father's age. He would play the augmented 6-4-2 chord at the opening of "Tristan and Isolde" and say, "Now, what if these tones were to appear in this key, instead of that key. The G# would be an Ab, and that would go to G. The D#, being considered an Eb now, would go to D. Now, let's see, what would we get? Aha". Then he would play it and lo and behold, we went to a new progression. And then another solution. Mike would delight in this kind of experiment and would revel

when I would come up with a solution. He took genuine pride in knowing that he would stimulate one's mind to explore these things with him.

One time when I was having trouble with a sequential modulation, I discussed it with another fine musician who explained there was only one way to do it. I wasn't satisfied so I asked Mike about it, whereupon he backed up about an eighth note, shifted the musical gears and away I went.

With his remarkable and highly developed talent, he could take a rather tenuous or even banal piece of music and, with his own peculiar alchemy, transform it into a musical gem. His "Evolution of Dixie" probably displays this great creativity better than any other piece.

In his autobiography, he presents a view of music and musicians from an angle seldom seen. He does not view those he writes about—Sousa, Herbert, Cohan, et al—as a player in their orchestras or bands, or as another conductor, or as a music critic or as a manager but as an arranger.

Before he started working for Victor Herbert, Herbert queried him about his training in music, in particular his teachers. Mike responded by stating he had studied with Mortimer Wilson (which he had), Tschaikowsky, Wagner and Victor Herbert. Herbert grinned and said, "Mr. Lake, I think you're the man for me." In a sense, Mike had studied with these others because he took their music apart, to find out what they did and how they did it.

Several of us from the Williams School played in Mike Lake's "Symphony in Gold". There were no reeds or strings, just brasses—1 Eb cornet, 5 Bb cornets, one horn, 5 trombones, one baritone (euphonium, if you wish) one tuba and drums. On occasion, Mike would write for the player rather than a 1st, 2nd or 3rd part. The part would be labeled "Del" (Staigers), "Bill" (Tong), "Ned" (Mahoney) or "Lennie" for me. And what a roster of the greats he assembled. . . Simone Mantia, Rudy Puletz, Al Pinard, Victor Weeks, Si Harris, Jack Holloway, Fred Pfaff, Charley Randall, Billy Bartow and Freddy Albright on drums. We would sit there in awe of these legendary performers.

I always thought Mike was able to make the piano sound

like a band! He prided himself on having a good “left hand”, referring to the ability to “peg” the bass note, then grab the afterbeats in rapid sequence, meanwhile using the right hand to punch out the melody and add the frills. He could do this seated sideways to the piano, legs crossed, with a cigarette dangling from his lips and smoke seemingly coming from his ears, eyes and nose all at the same time!

Mike was given to using expletives, some of them very colorful and descriptive, to say the least. Despite his occasional use of them, I never met a man who exemplified more the Christian ethic as we know it. Once during a rehearsal, Mike suddenly stopped conducting and blurted out. “J---- C-----, I smell cello!” We looked around at each other in amazement then began laughing. He had completely startled himself by writing something in such a way that he actually thought he was hearing cello. He couldn’t believe it; neither could we!

He was a devoted husband and adoring father, facts to which his wife and daughter can both attest. He was one of my dearest friends and was like a father to me. I think he considered me as close as a son. I have every letter he ever wrote me and, just recently, Merle Evans gave me all the correspondence he and Mike had had over the years. Mike would type the way he spoke. Some of his letters are priceless. He was a master of the simile and metaphor as will be revealed in the following pages. Indeed, he had a style of writing all his own. Among other things, he didn’t bother to use either the right or left hand margin stops on his typewriter and would further embellish the typed letter with long-hand notations in every available spot.

I do not know of anyone I ever met who said anything bad or derogatory about Mike Lake. He had the admiration of his peers, colleagues and certainly, his students. His wife and daughter (both named Suzanne) have entrusted the manuscript of this book to my care for which I am honored and grateful. I hope as you read it, you will come to feel about him as we do, that he was a wonderful human being who tried to make life a little more pleasant for those who enjoy music.

Leonard B. Smith

OVERTURE

What you are about to read is obviously not “literature.” And, discounting text books on music which I’ve put together, I can hardly be called an “author.”

However, as conductor and composer for many of the theatre’s greatest performers, and as orchestrator for many of our most renowned composers, I had fun and was paid for doing what I liked to do best of all, with people I liked best of all. So, I thought I would share my enjoyment.

I have been fortunate in my close and enduring friendships with many of the all-time “greats” in the show and music business worlds and I believe that intimate experiences and incidents recalled from close association with famous people, under varying conditions and circumstances, furnish a better and warmer understanding of their personalities than do the standard biographical accounts of their achievements found in any public library.

As I checked through the book before turning it over to the typist I was conscious of the fact that perhaps I had gone overboard in my emphasis on the fine qualities and inherent “sweetness” of many of the famous about which I’ve written. You might think “Hasn’t this guy ever met or worked with any except nice guys?” The answer is a resounding “yes.” I knew and had the misfortune to be commercially connected with many of the certified idiots and double-crossers in the business—and the music business, believe you me, attracts more of this type than any other business!—but few of these ever got beyond the first few bars of the introduction and they rapidly faded before the coda.

But the real, authentic “*Good Guys*” are not so easily forgotten. This book is about them.

Mayhew “Mike” Lake

CHAPTER I

LAND OF THE PILGRIMS' PRIDE

As far back as I can remember, "Our Land" with its cold, barren reaches of rock and sand, scrub oak and stunted pine was depressing to me. I was, in fact, convinced at an early age that any vaunted pride concerning that drab locale existed solely in the mushy minds of poets who had probably never seen the place or, at least, had never been forced to live there.

Many of our neighbors looked as gloomy as their surroundings. It was hard to tell where the rocks ended and the faces began.

Much of this can be attributed to our forebears, the Pilgrims, who, after bouncing around helplessly in a leaky scow and bored with each other's granite features, were naturally glad to plant their feet on anything resembling solid ground. . .like solid rock.

Those rocks, including the one named Plymouth, furnished ideal hideouts. Lo, many a new tomahawk was probably dented as the poor Indians mistook the rocks for Pilgrim noggins.

As it happened, our barren part of the state provided an ideal setting for those stern, rockbound bigots who, fleeing persecution, became prime persecutors. A few of their descendants have carried on to this day by occasionally jailing some innocent for "bein' so wicked and playin' cahds on Sunde" in his own home, with his own wife.

My own ancestors had migrated from Canada in the early part of the nineteenth century. Grandfather Paul Lake often told us about his grandparents trekking by oxcart from Grand Pre' to Massachusetts, and he always wound up by declaiming, "They were pioneers! They were just as brave as those who blazed the trails to the West!" Nobody questioned Grandpa Lake openly about their bravery, but I had a few reservations about their common sense. My head filled with

the beauties of Longfellow's Grand Pre', not to mention Evangeline, I couldn't imagine why anyone in his or her right mind would want to leave such surroundings to drag oxcarts all that distance and squat among a lot of rocks and clam shells. Once, when I ventured to quiz the old gent about it, he cut me off short and said he'd known a whole raft of Evangelines in his time and none of them, including my grandmother, was anything to rave about. We left it at that.

Our family name had been originally Beaulac, and no one has ever been able to find out when, why or where it was shortened to Lake. According to Grandpa Lake, a Massachusetts Volunteer in the Civil War, his grandfather—the plucky pioneer who dragged oxcarts with one hand while mowing down Indians with the other—was also named Paul Lake and he was a tough hombre who might have had some very sound reasons for leaving Canada and assuming a changed name. We never pursued this line of thinking much. On the other hand, the literal translation of many a French-Canadian name has often proved most embarrassing, if not ridiculous. Beaulac, of course, becomes "Beautiful Lake." Looking through the family album at the assorted mugs in our family, I felt that the old oxcarter did a large service to future generations by omitting any reference to beauty in the family name.

My debut into this splendid family did nothing to enhance the general situation. Dispassionate viewers said that I looked like something that a negligent fisherman forgot to throw back into the sea. *And I knew it.* Our neighbors, Kep Cuders and Deown Eabters, would look at me, then at each other, and say "Ain't he got the awfulest face you ever seed? An' looka them ears!"

Not much ego fodder in those observations, right? My mirror, on those rare occasions when I had the nerve to face it, showed that I possessed lips like a Ubangi's and oversize ears that flapped or filled with the wind—I had to tack against a brisk nor'easter—and I sensed that I was somewhat less in visage than, say, Rudolph Valentino or William Jennings Bryan.

Also, granted I was a mess, I couldn't understand what I

could have possibly done to my parents in the fetal stage for them to make things even tougher for me by appending such an outlandish given name—Mayhew. Mayhew Lake sounded more like the name of a pullman car. Nobody could pronounce it. I had to spell it out for everybody, apologize for having it and try and explain how I came by it. Mother said I was named after a dear friend of father's who had departed from this cruel world when he tangled with a freight car. It seemed that this Mayhew the First had managed to bear up under his name until that fast freight on the old Cape Cod Division caught up with him and messed him up considerably. I said "No wonder. With a name like 'Mayhew' something unpleasant simply had to happen to him!" Nevertheless, they pinned Mayhew onto me and I have been allergic to freight cars ever since.

With my face and ears, I figured the only profession for which I was suited was social outcast. Whenever I appeared on the scene, all the little girls—including one named Mareda whom I admired from a distance—would run away screaming. This can be upsetting and I found that my emotions, such as they were, would slop over at the sound of any sad music. This was encouraging, a bright ray of hope through the fog of misery, as I was convinced that such an overflow of inner feelings was a certain sign of musical genius. In later years, observing truck drivers choking up over "Mammy," I realized that sloppy emotions do not signify musical genius. But, at the time, I was reaching for anything.

The first tangible outlet for my gooey emotions was a parlor organ, bought by my father, one of those contraptions that housed an assortment of screeching harmonica reeds which were tortured to the breaking point by blasts of air emanating from bellows and activated by foot pedals. I found out early on that by wildly pumping the pedals I could sustain a magnificent fortissimo and, when I was alone in the house, I could give out to my heart's content, emotions oozing out in all directions.

There was a song of that period, a real heart-breaker with lyrics that moaned "My son, my son, my only one, Come back to your father once more!" This was my tour de force, replete with dramatic bathos enough to drain off a Niagara of

neuroses. . .the wicked father, a pirate, unwittingly kills his noble son, a brave sea captain. Singing at the top of my lungs as I tore the pump organ apart, I sobbed alternately the lines of the bereaved father and those of his dying son. I even wrote additional verses, so that the old man could make a good job of it by finishing off his unfaithful wife and his betrayed daughter and wind it all up by finally committing hari-kari, even though the family was not Japanese. When my bravura performance wasn't curtailed by broken pedal straps, my finale closed with the organ virtually steaming, our parlor awash in gore and tears, and an exhausted Caruso.

One day, while I was screaming for vengeance, crying out for mercy and decimating the organ, old lady Connolly, a midwife who lived across the field from us, came panting into the house. She "figgered from the yellin' " that mother had "miscal'ated her time" and she was there for any "eemergen-cy." Possibly the rigors of her work left little room for music appreciation. The experience disappointed us both.

Old man Connolly, husband to the tin-ear midwife, had hundreds of pigeons, all of which must have hated him down to the last feather. Either that or they were overfond of us Lakes, judging by the time they spent on our roof and window sills. Our house looked like Guano Village. The fact that our only source of water was rainwater piped from the roof—the pigeon's powder room—to a cistern furnished diversion for the entire family. I spent most of my time throwing rocks at the pigeons; mother spent most of her time dodging the rocks and sweeping up broken glass; father spent most of his time carting home new window panes and chasing me. Connolly's pigeons had something for everyone.

Our neighborhood could scarcely be mistaken for an exclusive extension of the Back Bay area. Mother's clothesline stretched from the rear of the house to the privy and I discovered that my weight, imposed upon the line, would tilt the "little house" forward to an alarming degree. Releasing my weight would cause the privy to slam back into its original position, or approximately. Since this elementary example in Physics worked just as effectively when the outhouse was occupied as when empty, it provided a rather neat antidote to boredom.

What I didn't learn until all too late was that only I appreciated the thrills to be had from our flying privy—and my saddest mistake occurred when I interrupted father's meditations. Having no idea that he was home, I trapezed on the clothesline, giving the al fresco convenience a super tilt. It teetered forward for a second, undecided whether to do a nose-dive or drop sedately back into place. Then it did a half-turn and slammed down, partly off its moorings and facing nowhere in particular. Father's roar was Olympian. Luckily, the door jammed and he couldn't get out immediately, so I made a quick getaway. I came home late for supper that night. But not late enough.

I grew up in the days of medicine shows, wherein occasional doses of culture and music appreciation were dispensed by peripatetic "physicians" whose only interest in culture was the quick sale of a dubious medicine, followed by an even quicker departure.

These shows all assumed an identical pattern: a "famous Indian doctor" voiced the virtues of "Kickapoo Indian Sagwa," guaranteed to heal broken bones, homes and hearts and to cure all diseases known to man or beast. Father, who would buy anything that came in bottles, was always foremost among the rioting suckers clamoring to press their hard-earned dough on the phoney doctor for a helping of his miracle drug. Meanwhile, a free concert was being plunked on a banjo by the doc's side-kick, an equally-suspect, no-talent type whose three chords somehow fit almost any tune of the times.

Additional cultural uplift was dished out via band concerts played on the flat roof of our one-story firehouse by a gallant little group which confused volume with ability.

The band uniforms must have, in an earlier era, served to fire the hearts and souls of rabid revolutionists; they certainly caused peaceable, housebroken citizens to look like murderous Cossacks. The uniforms did, though, instill pride among doting wives and sweethearts. Mother, beaming at father blowing away on the bandstand roof, would exclaim, "That's my Eddie playing the cornet. Ain't he handsome!" In his resplendent trappings, father looked anything but the same man who bellowed at me from the displaced privy.

For father, music was an avocation and he never considered that it could be anything else for others. The idea of anyone depending solely upon music for a livelihood seemed preposterous to him. From a small-town viewpoint he was absolutely right, and he had no other standpoint from which to mold an opinion. Such convictions were standard among those with limited horizons; they could not believe that a composer might receive substantial royalties or that a performer might earn a large salary.

A case in point: an actor friend of mine who had made a name for himself once spent part of his vacation at his old home in a small Maine town. During the preceding season he had created a role which had been largely responsible for the success of his show.

Because he had received "only \$200 a week," he griped to his brother in the presence of neighbors. After the others had departed, the brother said "Bill, if it makes you happy to lie to me about your crazy salaries. I don't mind at all. But please don't make fools of us both by letting the neighbors hear you." To one man, \$200 a week was an insult; to another, it was outside the realm of reality.

In our town, the musicians worked at their "paying" trades, attended band rehearsals—which were more social than cultural—and played an occasional parade or concert. Uncle Charlie played the "trambone" and ran a small country store. The store was heated by an ancient kerosene stove that reeked to high heaven with a stench that would have offended a moose. It didn't matter what a housewife bought at the store—raspberry jam or dried herring—the flavor she took home was kerosene. Uncle Charlie and father would sit for hours in this lethal atmosphere and blast duets for trombone and cornet, while I depleted the store's stock of raisins, condensed milk and blackberry jelly. These gastronomic forays would inevitably result in rather spectacular intestinal disturbances, alleviated by mother's reliable remedies. But when I was alone in the store and not ill from over-indulgence, I would practice on the instruments and eventually learned the cornet fingering as well as the trombone slide positions for all scales.

You see, I had made up my mind that I, the ugly duckling, would show them all. I'd go away and then return famous, marching up our road at the head of Sousa's band, right up to Mareda's doorstep. There I would sing the saddest of songs—all composed by me—while I conducted the band. Then, when Mareda came rushing out to throw herself into my arms, I'd give her a deserving brushoff, letting her plead awhile before I condescended to embrace her. Run away from me, will she!