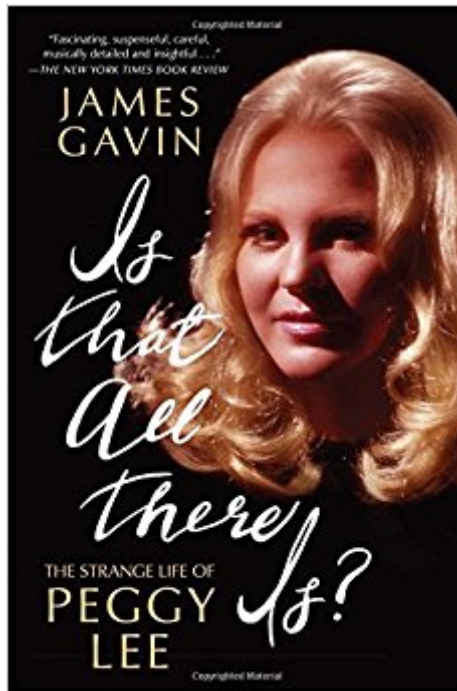




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Is That All There Is?: The Strange Life Of Peggy Lee



Synopsis

Praised by the New York Times Book Review as “fascinating, suspenseful, careful, musically detailed, and insightful,” this is a long-overdue biography of recording artist and musical legend Peggy Lee. Miss Peggy Lee cast a spell when she sang. She epitomized cool, but her trademark song, “Fever” covered by Beyoncé and Madonna is the essence of sizzling sexual heat. Her jazz sense dazzled Ray Charles, Duke Ellington, and Louis Armstrong. She was the voice of swing, the voice of blues, and she provided four of the voices for Walt Disney’s *Lady and the Tramp*, whose score she co-wrote. But who was the woman behind the Mona Lisa smile? With elegant writing and impeccable research, including interviews with hundreds who knew Lee, acclaimed music journalist James Gavin offers the most revealing look yet at an artist of infinite contradictions and layers. Lee was a North Dakota prairie girl who became a temptress of enduring mystique. She was a singer-songwriter before the term existed. Lee “had incredible confidence onstage,” observed the Godfather of Punk, Iggy Pop; yet inner turmoil wracked her. She spun a romantic nirvana in her songs, but couldn’t sustain one in reality. As she passed middle age, Lee dwelled increasingly in a bizarre dreamland. She died in 2002 at the age of eighty-one, but the enchantment with Lee has only grown. “Raucously entertaining [and] full of evocative scenes, wry humor and exasperated sympathy” (Publishers Weekly), *Is That All There Is?* paints a masterful portrait of an artist who redefined popular singing.

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Customer Reviews

“Gavin’s book is fascinating, suspenseful, careful, musically detailed and insightful” (New York Times Book Review) “Astute, unblinking and ultimately dispiriting biography of a woman who, like her idol Billie Holiday, could never master her own chaos.” (Washington Post) “Absorbing...the meat of Is That All There Is is Gavin’s adroit music writing and the dimension he brings to the details of Lee’s life. His command of the artistry and musicology in the worlds of jazz and Lee’s contemporaries is first rate....Gavin keeps focus on what Peggy Lee was doing musically even as everything else in her life was sensationally spiraling out of control.” (New York Journal of Books) “Gavin numbers among that rare breed of biographer capable of tremendous style and substance, meticulous about detail and accuracy yet blessed with exceptional storytelling.” (Maclean’s (Canada)) “A penetrating portrait of a woman embittered by childhood memories and failed marriages, struggling with alcohol and drugs, yet determined to have a career worthy of her voice. Old and new fans will appreciate this revealing portrait of a troubled and talented woman.” (Booklist) “[A] stimulating biography of the late jazz chanteuse. raucously entertaining. Full of evocative scenes, wry humor and exasperated sympathy, Gavin’s is an engrossing account of a singular talent.” (Publishers Weekly) “Nobody writes as eloquently, knowledgeably, and page-turningly about the midcentury music heroes who sang and lived our American story as James Gavin. His biography of Peggy Lee immerses us in a singular life of radiant self-invention. Peggy Lee patented the unlikely: she was the first white girl who sang (and felt) black. She sounded cool and soft and ironic and understated, making you lean in. This elegant, confident book does that, too.” (Sheila Weller, bestselling author of *Girls Like Us: Carole King, Joni Mitchell, Carly Simon and the Journey of a Generation*) “My dad, Nat King Cole, was very friendly with Peggy Lee, his label-mate at Capitol Records. Her mysterious glamour made quite an impression on me. Peggy was a trailblazer not just as a performer but as a songwriter, at a time when it wasn’t very common for singers to write their own songs. James Gavin has captured the essence of the rich musical era that people like my dad and Peggy defined. In his keenly observed, scrupulously researched biography he has also illuminated something very true and touching about the woman behind the glamour. I highly recommend this book.” (Natalie Cole) “Praise for *Stormy Weather*” “Eventful and suspenseful... A thorough and fluent biography.” (The New York Times Book Review) “Magnificent, gripping, marvelously written... [It] may just be one of the best biographies about show business, race, love, sex, and music ever written.” (Liz Smith, *Variety*) “A

fascinating study of a complicated woman and the complicated times that shaped her." (Usa Today)"In Gavin's capable hands, Lena Horne's story is both uniquely her own and an integral part of a larger cultural story." (San Francisco Chronicle) – "Sympathetic and tough." (The New Yorker)

James Gavin is the author of *Deep in a Dream*, *Intimate Nights*, and *Stormy Weather*. His writing has appeared in *NY Times*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Time Out New York*, among other publications. He lives in New York City.

Spoiler Alert: Peggy Lee was a little weird and as she aged it got worse, thanks in part to drugs and booze. This book dwells on the last third of her life and that's a shame. I think it's because it's the most sordid and there are still plenty of people around who can tell stories about Lee. I wish the story were more even, focusing just as much on her glory days. I suppose that because Lee was so hip, we expect more than the typical show business story but she had a healthy ego, liked to medicate herself and make things difficult for others, just like countless other stars of any generation. You get the sense that by the end, the author doesn't like much of anything about Peggy Lee and that's too bad. The best parts of the book are how she made her albums, music and shows.

I can see why some reviewers object to the treatment afforded the subject. It's a pretty unflattering portrait, in the end. But perhaps that's the way it was, I can't say. Nonetheless the book is very well written and I came away with an appreciation for her struggles as well as her immense talent, not to mention a renewed interest in her recordings. In spite of everything, I found myself rooting for the old girl.

James Gavin more than captures Peggy Lee. He writes so well about music. What a pleasure, in our digital world, to be able to listen to recordings, as I read about each stage in PL's storied career. He really gets to the essence of the many nuanced performances that Peggy Lee gave, and, thankfully, recorded. Wonderful work.

Being a journalist for 65 years (I edited my first publication the age of 9), being a journalism teacher of 51 years, being associated with the music business since the age of 14, and being the go-to person for record companies and producers looking for elusive facts or music, I am always looking

for that rarity, a show business biography that is deeply researched, thoroughly considered, intelligently written, fascinating, surprising and intriguingly intuitive. There aren't many. But James Gavin certainly hits the gong here and captures Peggy Lee in all her facets. I have been a Peggy Lee fan since the 1940s and well remember the family next door wearing out the Capitol 78 of "Golden Earrings" and "Manana" and so many other Peggy Lee records. I began collecting her work at the age of 14, read everything I could on her, talked with everyone I could who knew her, worked with her. I would travel out of town to see her in concert. The challenge with Peg was she was many personas in one, extremely intelligent, very disturbed in many ways and totally clear and self-confident in others, interior-directed while extremely attuned to what she was giving the world. And, for those of us who followed her music, she was many singers. Compare "How Deep Is the Ocean" with Goodman ("like the moon drifting across a cloudless sky" one writer observed) with "Fever" just for starters. So readers who are offended because Gavin has not delivered a worshipful valentine really don't want to know the real lady, who was lovely, loving, gentle, kind, demanding, amazingly courageous, eternally afraid, looked life in the eye, hid from it, addressed reality and lived in a total dream world. He has captured it all. What I find fascinating most is how the North Dakota little girl who looked solid and stolid, anything but a beauty, developed into one of the great beauties in American culture, and it is the same face! Peggy also served as a great example and teacher for other singers. Another lady singer, who has sold millions and millions and millions of records, told me that when she heard Peg's recording of "While We're Young" on Capitol, she understood for the first time how a song should be sung.

Interesting book, but at times seemed to be a bit redundant. But in any case, I enjoyed reading about what a crazy life Peggy Lee led. It is surprising, if this book is true, how differently I had perceived her before reading this book.

Get this book. Very great read.

Reading Mr. Gavin's chronicle of Ms. Lee was like watching a horrific train wreck in slow motion. Gavin captured the essence of Lee - superb talent and warts and all. I idolized her when I was young and still miss her special way with a song.

I found this book to be a very comprehensive, detailed and consistently interesting. Not only did it provide an insightful look into the life and career of Peggy Lee it provided a wonderful review of the

changing social mores and values of the past 80 years. The book is extremely engrossing. Negatives include the author's need to sometimes provide explanations of the obvious - Desi Arnaz starred as Ricky Ricardo in I Love Lucy, Carmen Miranda was the Brazilian Bombshell, Natalie Cole is Nat King Cole's daughter - to name a few. More disturbing is the author's apparent antisemitism --- he indicates the religion of a person only when they are Jewish. PS - some factual errors - i.e. Taylor and Burton's relationship began during Cleopatra not Night of the Iguana (a non-Taylor movie), Bacall was 57 not 51 during Woman of the Year. Aren't there book editors these days?

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