

MOVIE MAVEN

Priest and Eucharist helped actress find herself

When 1940s Hollywood star Betty Hutton hit bottom she found the Lord and peace

By Mary Claire Kendall

Betty Hutton, renowned Hollywood actress, recently died in Palm Springs at age 86.

Like her friend Judy Garland, Hutton was all heart. But, unlike Garland, after this "blond blitzkrieg" lost her way in Hollywood, she found happiness when she found God.

Hutton granted a rare interview to Turner Classic Movies host Robert Osbourne in April 2000 and discussed her spectacular show-biz career and amazing conversion.

Born Betty June Thornburg in Battle Creek, Mich., on Feb. 26, 1921, Hutton never knew her father.

She started singing at age 3 — spontaneously breaking into song when a drunken man threatened to beat up her mother at the speakeasy she ran, which Hutton remembered "like it was yesterday."

Later, when her mother — whom she told Osbourne was a "total alcoholic" yet "the most brilliant, wonderful woman" — took her to see a Charlie Chaplin film,

she thought, "I'm gonna be a star and my mother will stop drinking."

She gets her big break

Dubbed "America's No. 1 Jitterbug," Hutton's first real break was as vocalist for band leader Vince Lopez and his orchestra.

Shortly afterward, she earned Broadway roles and support from songwriter Buddy DeSylva, who promised to make her a star. As Paramount Picture's next executive producer, he was in a position to help. By 1941, Hutton had a contract.

Hutton's trademark exuberant performance in 1942's "The Fleet's In" — "a vitamin pill with legs," Bob Hope quipped — made her Paramount's top female star.



Betty Hutton PHOTO VIA NEWS.COM

"I just performed with all my heart," is how she described her approach. And the roles kept pouring in.

In 1950, Hutton got the lead in "Annie Get Your Gun" after Garland pulled out. But the film, she told Osbourne, "killed the performer in me." She didn't get along with her fellow cast members and DeSylva died that same year. In 1952, Hutton walked

out on her Paramount contract.

By 1971, two years after Garland died of a drug overdose, Hutton was on track for the same fate. "I didn't want to go on," she told Osbourne.

A new life in Christ

While recuperating at a Rhode Island hospital for a prescription-drug addiction, something miraculous happened.

She met Father Peter Maguire, who helped her turn her life around.

After meeting Father Maguire, Hutton told Osbourne: "I never found me until Father Maguire. I did not know who I was. I knew what the product was... like hamburgers, hotdogs. But I never found me."

This fatherlike figure reached out to her, and Hutton eventually converted to Catholicism. Her faith was deep. Before receiving Christ in Communion, "I would sob so because this brought something out of me I never knew was in there. That's my heart," she said. "Christ is my heart. But, I didn't know him." Likewise, she said, "I don't move anywhere without my rosary."

In May 1986, Hutton earned a master's degree in psychology, graduating cum laude from Salve Regina College in Newport, R.I., where she later taught drama.

She also worked with troubled people, relating, "If I can take a soul nobody wants ... and pull them up by their bootstraps, that is a joy."

Mary Claire Kendall writes from Maryland.