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Kay Thompson: From Funny Face to Eloise by Sam Irvin

BY PATRICK MCGUIRE

Sam Irvin's *Kay Thompson: From Funny Face to Eloise* is light, breezy, gossipy and filled with historical connections one could never imagine. Its subject is important enough to warrant a bio, but she is obscure enough to most readers under 50 to require one. Irvin fashions the story of Thompson's triumphs and defeats, her devastations and resurrections, in the easy, competent prose the genre calls for. Events happen quickly, responses are intense; Kay moves on. Psychology is glib and superficial; motives are black or white, and Thompson is generally believed when years after an event she explains it all in self-serving interviews. All of which is what we expect from a show-biz bio. To expect anything more would be obtuse; to write anything more about any but the rarest celebrity would be absurd.

Kay Thompson began life in 1909 as the ugly duckling in the beautiful and accomplished Fink family of St. Louis. She quickly learned to get attention by being far cleverer and more crazy-funny than any of her siblings. She had her first nose job when she was 18, and thus began her lifelong romance with plastic surgery. She was very bright, racing through grade school precociously. Besides being ugly and smart, however, she could play the piano and was thought of as something of a prodigy. Hearing a female blues singer before she was 20, Thompson decided that she, too, had a right to sing the blues, but not with the squeaky voice she possessed; so, with lessons, she changed her range and created that unique smoky jazz voice still available on recordings.

But, as one chapter title declares, Kay had a face for radio. And she did well in radio, moving with ever-growing popularity, but never becoming the recording success she had hoped. During these years, she was forever piecing together and coaching groups of mostly women to accompany her in performance. She became a sought-after re-arranger for songs already popular, working with classical conductor Andre Kostelanetz so successfully that, in his first Broadway musical, Vincente Minnelli "wanted to emulate the 'marvelous Andre Kostelanetz arrangements on the radio' and ended up borrowing Kay . . . to recreate that magic formula." Later, her successful nightclub act brought her adulation and admiration from audiences and performers alike.

In Hollywood, she coached voices through the 1940s and '50s: Lena Horne, Frank Sinatra, Angela Lansbury, Judy Garland, Andy Williams (with whom she had an affair), Marlene Dietrich and Van Johnson — and the list could go on.

On radio, in nightclubs and as a coach, Thompson was marvelous, but in Irvin's book, these are mere rehearsals for her two finest achievements: her performance in "Funny Face" (1957) and the publishing of her *Eloise* books. Irvin is at his best narrating the petty, intense feuds between Thompson and Fred Astaire on the "Funny Face" set and of Astaire and his personally hired choreographer, Hermes Pan, "colluding" to undermine her performance. When she visited the mayor of Paris, Pierre Ruais, they exchanged gifts: She received a silk scarf; he, a case of California wines, and then assured her that he would enjoy the wine "after it has been chilled." Then Ruais handed Thompson a "Friend of Paris" certificate with instructions for her to give it to Fred Astaire.

Thompson's other great achievement began in 1955 with the publication of *Eloise*, which was followed by three other *Eloise* books and a cottage industry of movies and products from which Thompson eventually distanced herself. Here, Irvin gives us courtroom drama and Thompson amusing the gallery with her *Eloise* voice to answer the judge's queries.

The author has done the right thing: He delivers a Kay Thompson that is neither complex nor superficial, dwelling less on her lovers and her sense of self than on her work, for, after all, that's what made her famous.

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