

Happy Birthday Deanna Durbin

Today is December 4th, and today an old flame, Deanna Durbin, turns 80. It's hard to believe. For those of you who are about my age, I'm sure you'll remember that lovely lady with the beautiful voice singing her way across the black and white movie screens of the late 1930's, '40s, and early 1950s. At one time she was the highest paid actress in Hollywood, topping both Shirley Temple and Judy Garland. But alas, with two failed marriages behind her and a deep disenchantment with the film industry, Deanna married again, retired in 1952, and moved with her third husband to a small town outside Paris.

My infatuation with Deanna Durbin began as I recall back in Miles Avenue School in Huntington Park, California. It was about 1936 and I was maybe ten. Saturday matinees were all the rage in those days and Deanna Durbin won my heart the first time I laid eyes and ears on her. She was wonderful to look at with a voice like an angel. About that time my folks gave me my first leather wallet and I cut out her picture from a movie magazine and carried it around for months. I don't remember much of those days, but whenever I think of Deanna Durbin two other images surface in my mind as well. I can still see the school grounds where I spent several recesses dragging a magnet through the dirt picking up iron particles, which incidentally I still have in a small jar in an old box up on a shelf in my family room. The other thing I remember was the board-floored tents we used back then for classrooms, where the teacher read allowed on hot summer afternoons from "The Wizard of Oz,"

Deanna Durbin was born on December 4, 1921, in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Her father became ill and the family moved from Canada to California the following year. Early on she had the makings of a strong singing voice, and in 1935 a talent scout noticed her in a school recital and convinced her family she should develop it. While studying voice formally, Deanna decided she would become an opera singer. But in 1936, she joined another young singer, Judy Garland, for a screen test. They wanted Judy for the film, *Three Smart Girls*, which was given instead to Deanna. Later on, ironically, Deanna was considered for the role of Dorothy in the film, *The Wizard of Oz* but it was decided she looked too mature and it was given finally to Judy Garland.

In the late 1930s, Deanna Durbin was making \$3,000 dollars a week, plus \$10,000 additional for each film. By the time she was 14 she was the highest paid female film star in the world, making three times the salary of President Roosevelt. By 1940, the singer was drawing \$400,000 per film. Not too shabby for a 19-year old during the depression years. Actor Robert Stack, incidentally, gave Deanna her first screen kiss in 1939 which shook the movie world.

Her third husband died in 1999 after 48 years of marriage, and Deanna still lives with her family in relative seclusion outside of Paris. Over in England they still play her records on British radio which are requested a little less often than those of

Alice Faye. I don't think my old flame was ever aware of my swooning admiration back in those early black and white movie days. I have however paid tribute to that lovely, vibrant singer of songs down through the ages. Every year on December 4th, I used to play a little game with my younger fellow employees at the office. At coffee breaks, as I got up from the table, I would leave a little folded piece of paper that said, "Happy Birthday, Deanna Durbin." And as I was washing my cup I'd watch as someone opened it, and asked the rest at the table, "Who's Deanna Durbin?" It never failed.

And so, today she turns 80. Recent photos of her that surface from time to time confirm that she, like another of my favorite octogenarian film beauties, Maureen O'Hara, is still a beautiful woman. Happy Birthday, Deanna Durbin. I bet you're surprised I remembered.

Tom Harvill, December 4, 2001