

# THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

## Hollywood star Ginny Simms made Palm Springs home after fulfilling life

Tracy Conrad

Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun  
USA TODAY NETWORK

Ginny Simms was stunningly beautiful with a voice to match, and at the 1957 Palm Springs Police Show, she did not disappoint the huge audience. One of several local movie stars who donated their time and talent to support the police department, she, like many stars, found her way to the desert from Hollywood and would become a fixture here.

Like many other beautiful women, she was born in Texas. Her family moved to Fresno, California when she was a kid. In high school and college she studied piano and began performing in local singing groups, moving on to radio. By 1932 she had her own show and soon after moved to the big city, San Francisco, and had stints working with Tony Martin and Woody Herman, until settling in with the Kay Kyser Orchestra where her singing was heard nationwide.

Kyser had become known nationally with his musical quiz act that evolved to become "Kay Kyser's Kollege of Musical Knowledge," a huge hit for NBC from 1939 to 1949. His big band was highly successful in its own right, with eleven number one records, including some of the most popular songs of the late 1930s and early 1940s. Kyser was generous and spotlighted his collaborators rather than keeping all the attention to himself. This led to many of his musicians and singers, including Simms, to become recognized stars.

Kyser's band appeared in several motion pictures giving Simms her start in Hollywood. The band appeared in "Stage Door Canteen" and "Thousands Cheer" during World War II. After the war, Kyser's band continued to record hit records with lots of singers including



Ginny Simms performs at the 1957 Palm Springs Police Show.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE FRED WEIGEL COLLECTION PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Jane Russell, Frank Sinatra and Dinah Shore. Simms nearly married Kyser but left the band in the early 1940s to pursue her solo career (like many of her contemporaries and friends she entertained the troops during WWII, including at Torney General Hospital in Palm Springs, and years later she sponsored construction of 450 new homes for vet-

erans in Los Angeles).

She recorded along alongside some of the biggest names in the music business like Dinah Shore, Peggy Lee, Ella Fitzgerald and Jo Stafford. All totaled she made eleven movies with an amazing array of other stars including Lucille Ball, Peter Lorre, Bela Lugosi, Boris Karloff, John Barrymore, Lupe Velez, Edgar



Backstage at the 1957 Police Show, Ukie Sheron, Tony Martin, and a young Cyd Charisse greet Ginny Simms.

Bergen, and Abbot and Costello. In the Cole Porter biopic in 1946 she starred alongside Cary Grant and Alexis Smith, singing some of Porter's most beloved songs, but her career not explicable lost momentum after she turned down a marriage proposal by newly divorced MGM studio boss Louis B. Mayer, who retaliated by immediately dropping her contract at the studio (in 1951, perhaps due to Mayer stalling her career, she tried to retire from the stage performing only locally for fun, and further afield for good causes).

Despite turning down Mayer, she married into the highest echelons of American society. Her first husband, Hyatt von Dehn was the founder of the eponymous hotel chain. Her second husband, Bob Calhoun was an oil tycoon, and her last husband was Attorney General of Washington State, Don Eastvold.

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# Simms

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Hyatt von Dehn had a home in the desert adjacent to Thunderbird Country Club. Many of Simms' movie friends were regularly visiting the desert in the 30s and 40s. By the time Ginny Simms retired completely from singing and had married Eastvold, she was a full-fledged Palm Springs resident. She had dallied in decorating some of her first husband's hotels, but by 1962, she and Eastvold were living in Palm Springs and developing and decorating properties in Palm Springs, Washington, Minnesota, Hawaii, Mexico and in Spain (one company, World International Vacation Club, promoted travel and another, Centennial International Corp., sold "Ginny Simms Melody Homes," distinctive designs for the modest owner).

Simms was a fixture around the valley from one end to the other. Gorgeous images of her exist at the Salton Sea's North Shore Beach Club in fancy evening attire where she appeared regularly and seem as natural as those of her hanging out with star composer Jimmy

Van Heusen at his piano bar in downtown Palm Springs.

On stage here in the desert often served important causes. At her 1956 headline appearance at the Chi Chi Club audience members included Frances Langford, Virginia O'Brien, Morey Amsterdam, Brod Crawford and Bob Hope who obligingly went on the radio with her after the show from her dressing room. Before the show, at her home on Mesquite, she graciously entertained a crowd of 200 of the town's most prominent citizens, making for an exceedingly long day and night. Walter Winchell joined her on stage for the 1957 Police Show for some gest about movie gossip. And with a swinging band and the singing sons of Bing Crosby, she raised funds for disabled children in 1962.

After much good work, just shy of her 82nd birthday in 1994 she suffered a heart attack and is interred, like her friends Frank Sinatra and Jimmy Van Heusen, at Desert Memorial Park in Cathedral City.

*Tracy Conrad is president of the Palm Springs Historical Society. The Thanks for the Memories column appears Sundays in The Desert Sun. Write to her at [pshstracy@gmail.com](mailto:pshstracy@gmail.com).*