WITHIN THE SHADOWS OF PICKFAIR:

An Interview With Charles "Buddy" Rogers

edited by Ronald L. Davis

HANDSOME CHARLES "BUDDY" ROGERS, a native Kansan,[1] has lived among legends. He moved to Pickfair, previously the Hollywood mansion of silent screen stars Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, after he and Pickford married in 1937,[2] and remained there until his wife's death forty-three years later. "I told Mary I didn't want any part of it when she left," said Rogers. "I didn't want to live there alone." He kept an acre-and-a-half of the property—"just to stay around," he remarked—and built a new home there for himself and his present wife, selling the rest of the estate to singer Pia Zadora and her husband. "I still have a feeling for Pickfair," the former actor told me. "It's right there. You can see the guesthouse through the window."

Still dapper in his mid-eighties, Buddy began by giving me a tour of his new home's memorabilia room, mainly filled with pictures and mementos of Mary Pickford, including her two Oscars—one she received for best actress of 1928-1929 (in *Coquette*), the other an honorary award presented to her by the Motion Picture Academy in 1976.[3] Rogers seemed pleased by my obvious excitement and urged me to pick up the Pickford Oscars, which I did with childlike glee. He then showed me his view from a deck, pointing out Falcon Lair, where Valentino had lived, higher up in the Hollywood Hills. Fred Astaire had been a neighbor for years, and Sammy Davis, Jr., lived next door. Raquel Welch owns a home just below, although she now spends most of her time in the East. Buddy did admit that he'd been known to cast an eye her way with binoculars when the famous sex symbol was out sunning by her pool.

Friendly and vibrant, he suggested we talk in the living room and asked for a tray of coffee and cookies to be brought in. It was the morning of August 19, 1988, a clear southern California day. I sat next to him on a sofa, watching his animated face, thinking how he had not only been a successful screen actor himself, but had lived long and intimately with an original Hollywood icon. He had seen old Hollywood, personally and abstractly, fade into something new, yet his attitude contained more excitement over what had been rather than regret for what was past. Rogers still possessed a quick wit, a down-home quality wrapped in easy sophistication, and an infectious element of wonder. When our interview was over, he walked me to my car, asking about my work and my abiding interest in films. I mentioned that I had begun my teaching career in Kansas, at Emporia State, and still had close ties there. He smiled as we shook hands. Warning me to take care driving down the steep hill, he pushed a button for the security gate to open, and I backed the car around. "Tell my Kansas friends hello," he said, as I waved and headed toward the gate, feeling that I'd lived a fantasy.

Davis: Buddy, how did a boy from Olathe, Kansas, first become interested in music and acting?

Rogers: Olathe means beautiful, Ron. It's an Indian word for beautiful, and to me Olathe is beautiful. My mother and dad[4] loved Olathe; we all did. My grandparents came out in a horse and buggy from

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1. Charles Edward "Buddy" Rogers was born in Olathe on August 13, 1904.

2. Buddy Rogers and Mary Pickford were married June 26, 1937, in Hollywood, California. Miss Pickford died May 29, 1979, at the age of eighty-six.

3. Buddy also was honored by the Academy when he was presented with the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Humanitarian Award on March 24, 1986.

4. Buddy Rogers was the son of Bert H. and Maude M. Rogers.

Indiana and Illinois. Before my mama went up to heaven she said, "Honey, I just want to say something to you." I said, "Yes, Mother?" She said, "Darling, I think that you'd have been much richer, had more friends, and had more money to travel if you hadn't gone to Hollywood and stayed in Olathe."

Davis: When you enrolled in the University of Kansas,[5] what kind of a career did you envision for yourself?

Rogers: Dad had a newspaper in Olathe, a weekly newspaper.[6] I grew up with the printing press. I could run the Linotype and set the type and all that. I'd deliver the papers, and I became part of the weekly newspaper. Although I preferred music in high school to journalism, I told Dad I would take journalism at the University of Kansas. But I didn't. I loved music. About a year before I went to KU I said, "How am I going to work my way through school? I've got a trombone there, but I need drums or something." So I put two or three instruments together and had a little five-piece band at KU. On Friday nights I'd make ten dollars, on Saturday nights fifteen dollars. Ron, I made twenty-five dollars a week. I had a Model T Ford, I had a raccoon coat, and I had three or four girls.

Davis: Wasn't it during the Chicago World's Fair of 1933 that you formed your own professional group?

Rogers: I had made a lot of pictures out here—five or six a year in the twenties and early thirties—and was getting some bad notices. "Rogers is not much of an actor," some of the critics said. So I thought, "I'll show them." Rudy Vallee wanted to be a picture star, and I wanted to direct a band. I wanted to be in front of a band. We should have traded. But Rudy said, "Buddy, you give up movies, you get a band, and you'll meet more girls in one night than you will in Hollywood in all your career." So I got a band. My first job was in the College Inn at the Sherman Hotel during the Chicago World's Fair in 1933.

Davis: How would you describe your band's sound?

Rogers: We had a big band sound, seventeen pieces at the time. That was the era of the Dorseys and Goodman and the start of all the big bands. We *had* to have seventeen pieces for some reason or other. We had microphones then, but I don't think Rudy Vallee had a microphone a year or two before. We didn't have the loud music; we didn't have any acoustical instruments. We just had seventeen musicians and a girl singer. When we traveled, playing one-night stands, we had twenty people on our bus.

Davis: Didn't Gene Krupa play drums with your band?

Rogers: Yes, I discovered Gene Krupa down in a little town in Oklahoma. He had a little band there. I persuaded him to leave Oklahoma and come with me. John Green, the composer, was my first pianist.

Davis: Really!

Rogers: He's still out here conducting his orchestra at the Hollywood Bowl every summer.[7] Marilyn Maxwell was my first girl singer. I found her and brought her out here, and she left me for the movies.

Davis: What would you say was the magic of Gene Krupa?

Rogers: Gene was tied up in a knot. We would play thirty minutes and be off twenty minutes. Every intermission he was backstage on a rubber-center drum. He was a complete musician. I don't know whether to call him a musician or a complete sound man. Gene Krupa was a nice boy. We had a few years together. I went to London to make a film, and the big boys grabbed Gene and took him. Benny Goodman or one of the Dorsey brothers grabbed him, and that was the end

5. Buddy Rogers attended the University of Kansas from 1922-1925.

6. Bert H. Rogers was editor of the *Olathe Mirror* for twenty years.

7. John Green, music composer, conductor and arranger, died May 15, 1989, in Beverly Hills, California, at the age of eighty. *New York Times*, May 17, 1989, p. 5B.

His love of music led Buddy Rogers (center) to organize his first band while a University of Kansas student.

of my Krupa. At Chicago we'd play our opening session around seven-thirty or eight o'clock. Every time Gene Krupa would come back from an intermission our tempo was up just a little bit. I had no idea that he might be taking something to stimulate him. That was the first time I ever heard of marijuana in my life.

Davis: Was the personality of the front man important to a big band?

Rogers: It seemed like we had to smile and laugh and shake hands and say, "Oh, you bet we'll play that for you; we'll dedicate this to you!" It seemed it was salesmanship that was needed out in front of a band.

Davis: What originally brought you to Hollywood?

Rogers: I had been at the University of Kansas for three years, taking journalism and playing my little drums and trombone and saxophones. And Dad wrote me a letter from Olathe, in which he said: "Mr. [S. C.] Andrews, who owns the Paramount Theatre in Olathe, was in yesterday. He told me that Paramount Studio is looking for ten boys and ten girls from throughout all the universities in the United States for a school of acting." He said, "They're coming by Lawrence. Will you try it?" I was living at the Phi Si house. Forrest ["Phog"] Allen, the great coach, and James Naismith, who invented basketball, were my teachers. I wasn't thinking about acting at all, it never entered my mind. In high school I did one little play. So I wrote Dad. (He was only twenty miles away, but we'd write letters.) I said, "Dad, I'm here with Forrest Allen and all the basketball players at the Phi Si house. No, sir, I don't want any part of it." He was upset and wrote me another letter. It was a beautiful letter, I could see tears all over the paper. He said, "Son, you've never failed me in your life. Please, do it for me." So I made a test for Dad, knowing that I didn't know how to act and didn't have a chance. They sent a cameraman, a crew of three people to the university. There were thirty or forty of us making tests, and I knew I couldn't act. I had an inferiority complex. I got in front of the camera, nervous, and the first thing the director said was, "All right, sing!" It was a silent movie, but I pretended to sing. "All right, that's fine," he said.

"Now, can you cry?" So I had to cry. "Can you do this? Can you do that?" I couldn't believe what I was trying to do. I said, "Oh, no, this is not for me." About three days later I received a telegram from either Adolph Zukor or Jesse Lasky that said, "Come to New York."

Davis: It must have been quite a surprise!

Rogers: I went to Paramount's Long Island studio, their main studio at the time.[8] I met the nine boys and ten girls, and we all went to school together. Everything was silent, so I didn't know how we were going to learn to act. You had to act with your eyes or your shoulders or your technique of turning or something physical. They taught us how to fall down the stairs without hurting ourselves; that was awfully important it seemed like. The one I liked best of all, though, was when they taught us how to hold a kiss for three minutes without laughing! There was no voice, so you couldn't act with your voice. You acted with your body in those years. Mr. Lasky came to school one day and said, "Buddy, do you have argyles and knickers and that sort of thing?" I said, "Well, that's all I wore at the University of Kansas." He said, "Wear them tomorrow, will you?" I said, "Surely." So they took me out of the school classroom about seven-thirty in the morning and put me in a limousine, and we started driving out on Long Island. I knew more or less where we were, and we drove twenty, thirty, forty minutes. I could see some trucks and some equipment, and there was a golf course. We drove up on the golf course, and I saw they were making a movie there. Lasky said, "Buddy, come here. I want you to meet your father." He introduced me to W. C. Fields. It was his first movie, and I played his son in the movie.

Davis: This was *So's Your Old Man?*

Rogers: That's right.

Davis: What kind of fellow was Fields?

Rogers: Well, he was a different type of man. He had all these trick golf clubs. He was whipping them around trees, and they'd wrap themselves around the trees. He wasn't like any man I'd ever met before, to be honest. I didn't know much about him other than that he was a big stage star at that time. But I worked as his son in that movie.

Davis: One of your early films was *Fascinating Youth* with Clara Bow.

Rogers: Yes, but I made two before that. We made a school picture with all twenty of us in the acting school. I was still in New York, and they said, "Buddy, we're going to send you to California. You're going to play Ronald Colman's young brother in *Beau Geste.*" They sent me to get all my French Foreign Legion costumes, which I did. But I said, "Can I stop in Olathe on the way to California?" They said, "Yes, take a day or two off there, Buddy." I'll admit that I put on my uniform in Olathe, and for two days I walked up and down Olathe's main street saluting everybody. I got back on the train in Kansas City and went to Hollywood, and they met me down at the station. They welcomed me to Hollywood: "Welcome, Buddy! Oh, it's going to be great! But you're not going to be in *Beau Geste.*" I said, "What?" "No, no, we've got something else for you." I said, "I'm going back to Olathe, where if a person says you're going to do something, you do it." I said, "I don't know of anything like this. You give me a part and then you take it away from me!" They said, "Oh, we'll get something for you." I said, "No, I want to go home." They said, "Wait a minute. We're going to have you test for *Old Ironsides,* a big movie." I said, "All right, fine." I tested, and Charlie Farrell got the part. I was so discouraged; I wanted to get back to Olathe. I said, "Mr. Lasky, honestly, I'm not cut out for this kind of life. I'm going home." He said, "Buddy, Bill [William E.] Wellman is going to make an aviation picture called *Wings.* Do you want to have lunch with him and talk to him?" I said, "Of course, I'd love it." So I met Bill Wellman and we lunched. That's kind of how it started.

Davis: *Wings,* of course, became a great classic.[9]

Rogers: We had no idea it would ever turn out that way. I leave next week for France for a film festival to run *Wings.* After all these years it still holds up.

Davis: What kind of director was William Wellman?

Rogers: Tough! I was frightened of him. He was a flier in World War I, in the Lafayette Escadrille. He was a fighter, and he was a tough one. He frightened me, so I was on my toes all the time. He had different ways of getting feelings and expressions out of you. Dick [Richard] Arlen and I had a fight scene in the film we were going to shoot the next day. Billy comes to me and says, "Buddy, Dick Arlen's not your friend." I said, "What?" Wellman said, "He tells me in this scene tomorrow he can knock the hell out of you." I said, "No." Bill goes to Dick Arlen and tells him, "Buddy's not a friend of yours." He had us really fighting the next day. That's the type of director he was.

Davis: Wasn't the film made in San Antonio?

Rogers: We were there nine months. We used Kelly Air Force Base, we used Brooks Field, all the equipment, everything. The United States government helped Paramount finance that film. They charged nothing at all for all those airplanes and artillery and the guns and men and uniforms. Paramount couldn't afford a film

8. Buddy Rogers left Olathe for Paramount Studios on Long Island during the summer of 1925. *Topeka Daily Capital,* August 2, 1925.

9. *Wings* won the Academy Award for best picture of 1927-1928, the first film to win an Oscar.

Charles "Buddy" Rogers and Clara Bow from a scene in Wings, *now considered a movie classic.*

like that at that time. I remember once the bankers came from New York and said they might have to close down *Wings*. We were spending so much time and so much of the government's money.

Davis: What kind of fellow was young Gary Cooper, who was in that film with you?

Rogers: We met him on the train. Dick Arlen and I were pretty good friends by that time. Cooper was just a big, tall, skinny, quiet guy. We'd call him Long Tall Sam or Quiet John or something; we had funny names for him. He wouldn't say a word. We were on the train for two days and two nights: "Yep. Hello. Yep." That's all he'd say. He just had one scene in the film, but he was so good in it. He was so different. He stood up six-foot-four and had that lean face. And when he said, "Goodbye, boy," you knew you liked him. You liked him right from the start.

Davis: How would you describe the Paramount lot when you first worked there?

Rogers: There were about twenty or thirty people under contract at the studio. MGM had their thirty or forty people, Warner Brothers had theirs, and we had ours. We had Swanson and Chevalier and Beery and on and on. I didn't notice much at first, because they sent me right away to Kelly Field and I was down there seven, eight, nine months. While I was at Kelly Field, we heard that talkies were coming in. We heard that John Gilbert had a voice that was high, and we heard that only one voice out of a thousand would record for film. Dick Arlen and Cooper and I thought, "I don't know whether I've got a voice or not." I said, "Well, I have a Kansas accent. I don't think that's going to catch on." Dick Arlen said, "I've never been on the stage." We thought you had to have been on the stage or have some weird voice. We were so worried. We were finishing up *Wings* and coming back to Paramount, and they had a big sound stage there just to find out which players had a voice, who was going to be able to stay and continue making movies. And Jack Oakie had moved into our dressing room; he'd just come in while we were making *Wings*. Jack said, "Hey, Buddy, I can sing and dance, but I don't know whether I've got a voice." He didn't know whether he would be able to make it or not; he was that frightened. Every day they'd take one star into the studio and spend all day there. I remember one day Wally [Wallace] Beery went in, and Cooper and Dick and I were there looking around the corner trying to find out when our time was going to come. Three o'clock that afternoon the doors swung open, and a voice said, "Wally Beery has a voice! He can talk!" It was that serious. The four of us—Cooper, Dick Arlen, Jack Oakie, and myself—joined our hands and said, "If one of the four of us doesn't have a voice, we will give ten percent of our salary for the rest of our lives." Then we found out that we all had voices. It seemed as though they just didn't know how to control the early mechanics of sound right then. I think this is rather interesting: they were sending me back to Princeton to make *Varsity*, a college film. It was a silent movie, but right in the middle of the film I started talking, for ten minutes I talked during a silent movie. They were testing me. They sent that all around the country to find out whether my voice would be acceptable.

Davis: I've heard Paramount described as the country club of studios. Apparently it was quite friendly and easygoing.

Rogers: It seemed to be. The whole studio was one big family. Zukor, Lasky, the lawyers, the producers—we were a Paramount family. We were under contract, and we were all so happy there that it was too easy. We were a family, we wanted to stay together, we wanted to be together. That's the way it was. We were close. Once a month we would have a white tie dance at the Biltmore Hotel. We would have the people at Warner Brothers, Fox, their stars. We could cut in on Garbo, Mary Pickford, Norma Shearer, everyone. We knew everyone. They knew us and we knew them because we were friends.

Davis: Wasn't it on *My Best Girl* that you met Mary Pickford?

Rogers: We finished *Wings*, and Hope Loring, who did the adaptation of *Wings*, said to me one day, "Buddy, what are you doing tomorrow afternoon right after lunch?" I said, "Nothing." She said, "Meet me out in front of Paramount. I want to take you someplace." I met Hope Loring, I got in her car. We drove fifteen or twenty minutes to the entrance of a big studio, as large as Paramount. We drove inside. She didn't tell me what we were doing or anything. We drove into the studio and stopped in front of a bungalow. She said, "Buddy, I'm going to park the car over here. Will you step out and ring the doorbell to the bungalow, please?" I got out, went to the door, pushed the doorbell, the door opened, and Mary Pickford came to the door. I had no idea Hope Loring and Mary were friends. Mary was getting ready to make a film, and she brought me over there to see if I might make a test with one of the four or five boys who later tested. I was kind of shocked when the girl with the curls opened the door. I knew of her, and I'd seen some of her pictures. I'll never forget, she said once, "Buddy, who was your favorite star?" I said, "Well, Norma Shearer." So that was my meeting with Mary. She said she was going to make a film and she'd like to test me with two or three other chaps. I said, "Fine." I was sitting up in this dressing room, and I could see the three boys who went in to test. It took about forty or fifty minutes for each one of them. I was waiting there, and my heart was pounding. "Mr. Rogers, come on." I got on the set, and Mary came to me and said, "Now, Buddy, please don't be nervous. I'm going to help you with this test. I didn't help the other boys." And we made a test, and she seemed to want me to win the part. As I look back, that little dickens wanted me to win that part! I worked with her, we were on the film two months. She was the producer, the backer, the money, everything, and she didn't say one word about it on the set. She was just an actress on the set. But when she saw the dailies and she talked to the director, it was another matter. I'll bet you anything she had many meetings at night after I was gone. But she never raised her voice on the set. It was amazing.

Davis: How would you describe Mary Pickford at that time?

Rogers: She was tiny. She wore a size three shoe and was five feet tall. She had beautiful hair and was sweet, thoughtful, funny, cute, darling. And bright! Her mother was around quite a good deal.

Davis: Charlotte.[10]

10. Mary Pickford was solely raised by her mother, Charlotte Smith, from the time of her father's death when she was four years old. Charlotte Smith died in 1928 following several years of illness. *Current Biography, 1945* (New York: H. W. Wilson Co., 1946), 467, 470; Mary Pickford, *Sunshine and Shadow* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1955), 179-83.

Rogers: Charlotte. They were pals. They did everything together, everything. I remember Mary told me her mother would go out and count the number of people going in to see Mary's films. Her mother was ill while I was making that film as I remember, and Mary was very sad. I remember that she would pray all the time for her mother's health while we were making that picture. Another thing that Mary did, she had a French tutor on the set all the time. She was determined to speak French like the French people in Paris speak, with a Parisian accent. And by God, she could do it. We later went to Paris, and she could get on that television and speak her French just beautifully. I was so proud of her.

Davis: After the two of you were married, Pickfair remained the center of the Hollywood social scene. Did you enjoy that?

Rogers: Mary never did as much as Douglas Fairbanks had. He enjoyed that. He was the one who would go over to Europe, Mary told me, and book all these counts and countesses and lords and ladies. It was his idea much more than Mary's, but she went along with it. We did entertain a great deal, very attractive people. They liked to come to Pickfair, and Mary liked them. The Mountbattens came there on their wedding, and we could go to the White House. So many wonderful things.

Davis: Describe Pickfair.

Rogers: Pickfair was the first big house in the hills of Beverly Hills. I don't mean down on Sunset. Mary told me it was originally a hunting lodge, a smaller, rambling hunting lodge, owned by a banker in Los Angeles. This banker was a hunter, and on a nice clear weekend he would drive all the way from Los Angeles to Beverly Hills to hunt wild game, right where we're sitting. Mary said, and it's true, that she and Mr. Fairbanks were able to buy fifteen acres and Pickfair for $34,000.

Davis: Hollywood was really a sleepy little town at that time, wasn't it?

Rogers: Yes, no traffic like today. Good gracious. No traffic! I'm going to let you in on one terrible thing I did. In our acreage here, down below there was a big barn and cows and horses. In 1923 Mr. Fairbanks and Mary were in England. They had made a Rolls Royce for the Queen at that time and one for Lord Mountbatten and another for Mary. There were three Rolls Royces in 1923. And I'd seen that old car—it had been on stilts for fifteen or twenty years—down in that barn. We were going to clean up the barn, and somebody said, "Gosh, what would you take for that?" I said, "Twelve-hundred dollars." I sold a 1923 Rolls Royce for twelve-hundred dollars! That shows what a country boy from Kansas I was.

Davis: You showed me, before we began talking, the car Mary gave you on your twenty-fifth anniversary.

Rogers and Mary Pickford met with the filming of My Best Girl.

Rogers: That's right, she surprised me on our twenty-fifth anniversary. It's a 1960 Rolls Royce.

Davis: It's a beauty. What in your experience was necessary to be a successful silent screen actor?

Rogers: As I look back, it just seems like God and luck to me. I always prayed a lot, I always wanted to get to heaven, and I had such good luck. Today you have to be a little more prepared than we had to be at that time. I think it's more difficult today than it was in the early years.

Davis: Did you feel that movies were a young industry with a lot of experimentation and everybody sort of finding their own way?

Rogers: It seemed like we were growing up. We had no agents, not one agent. We were all on our own. We had contracts. I had a five-year contract with Paramount, and it was for $100 a week the first year. But when I made *Wings*, they bought me a suit of clothes, so they were taking $10 a week out of my salary. I was doing that picture for about $60 or $70 a week.

Davis: You were talking about the family atmosphere at Paramount. Did you feel that Paramount gave you every opportunity to develop as a young actor?

Rogers: It seemed like it. It seemed like we were pals. I was part of their family, one of their children. I was around there eight, ten, maybe twelve years. I made thirty or forty films there; I'd make five or six every year. They'd put together a yearly book, and they'd hand it to us—Dick Arlen, Cooper, Clara Bow, all of us. We were so glad to get this album. We'd turn and see, "Oh, I'm going to make six pictures this year! The first one's with Clara Bow. It's called so-and-so, and he's going to direct." It was all of our family together.

Davis: What kind of person was Clara Bow?

Rogers: Darling. Vivacious, cute, fun on the set, peppy, attractive. When Elinor Glyn gave her the title of the "It" girl, that seemed to change her around.[11] She

11. In 1927, Clara Bow starred in *It*, a film taken from a novel by Elinor Glyn. Dubbed the "It" girl from that time on, Miss Bow retired from filmmaking in 1931. She died at the age of sixty in 1965. *New York Times*, September 28, 1965, p. 1.

became the "It" girl. And that brought her to an early death, I do believe. She died very, very young. She overdid, she just exhausted her body being an "It" girl.

Davis: Do you think that was one of the problems in the publicity office's creating an image for young performers? Was there a tendency to try to fit the image?

Rogers: Fit it in, fit it in. They tried to make me America's boyfriend. They'd try anything. One day I got up and I was driving over to the studio from where I lived, and I saw a big twenty-four-sheet billboard. It said, "Buddy Rogers in a new film. He's called the darling of the debs." I said, "My God!" I went in and said, "Please tear that down. I'm no darling of any debs." They were looking for little things like that.

Davis: What was your first sound film?

Rogers: It was that ten minutes in *Varsity*, my screen test for sound. Then I guess it was with Clara Bow, I made two or three pictures with her very early.

Davis: Was *Close Harmony* a talkie?

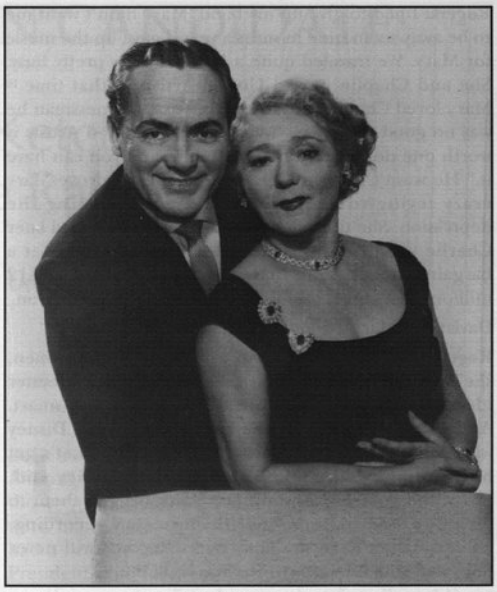
Rogers: Yes. I was able to use my instruments. I had my horns in that one, too. Paramount knew I could play some instruments. When we were making silent pictures, we always had a three-piece orchestra on the set to make us laugh—laugh music, cry music, and all that. I'd have my sax and trombone there, and I'd play with them between shots. So they let me make a sound film, a musical called *Close Harmony*. I had a band in *Close Harmony*, I remember that.

Davis: Was John Cromwell a good director to work with?

Rogers: John was a strong director. The other night I met one of my directors, George Abbott. He's 100 years old. Mr. Lasky said to me, "Buddy, George Abbott's never made a movie, but he's known back in New York and actors and actresses love to work for him. Would you let him direct one of your pictures?" I said, "Of course, anything." And Abbott came out, and we made a film together called *Half-Way to Heaven*. Making these films would take about six weeks at that time. It wasn't too hard work. We didn't have to get up at four or five like they do today. They were easier, shorter. They'd cost about $200,000 instead of $10 or $12 or $15 million. Budgets have changed so much.

Davis: You were making movies so fast that there must be a tendency for them all to run together.

Rogers: The first few years I made six a year. I remember one, *Best of Enemies*. I was over at Fox on a loan-out. We were making it on a big sound stage, and we had a little recess. The director and someone else and I walked outside and were just standing there, the three of us. All of a sudden an earthquake began, the big one of 1933. I could see the mountains just swaying. Betty Grable grabbed me, crying and screaming. My heart was jumping, I thought it was the end of the world. The sound stage almost tumbled down, and people were screaming. I'll never forget that. I heard that some people were in a car during the quake, and they didn't even know it was an earthquake. So for the next day-and-a-half I lived in my car!



Buddy Rogers and Mary Pickford.

Davis: Was Betty Grable good to work with? I know you did *This Way Please* with her.

Rogers: Yes. She was cute, fun, likable, and talented. She could dance, tap on her toes, and she could sing well. I worked six weeks with her. Fibber McGee and Molly were in *This Way Please*. It's the only picture Mary Livingstone ever made. She didn't like movies. She gave up her career to be Jack Benny's wife.

Davis: In New York you did *Hot-Cha!* on the stage. Was that with your band?

Rogers: No. That was with [Florenz] Ziegfeld. Bert Lahr was the comedian, Lupe Velez and I were the co-stars, Yolanda was one of the dancers. I remember Ziegfeld sat out in the audience, directing, and we were all kind of scared of him. The show was not a big hit, it didn't play too long. That was all right with me, because I had opened with my orchestra at the Pennsylvania Hotel, and I was doubling. They were keeping me busy in those years.

Davis: Particularly after you and Mary Pickford married, how did you balance two such active careers?

Rogers: I had to give up my band. Mary didn't want me to be away six to nine months a year. I gave up the music for Mary. We traveled quite a bit, Mary was pretty busy. She and Chaplin owned United Artists at that time.[12] Mary loved Chaplin as a friend, but as a businessman he was no good. He'd say, "Mary, darling, United Artists is worth one dollar. Give me one dollar and you can have it." He wasn't a businessman, and it nearly drove Mary crazy trying to keep the studio going during the depression. She'd been losing so much money, and later Charlie was in Switzerland. So she had to sell it at a bargain price. I think that studio sold for $10 or $12 million. Last year it sold to Ted Turner for $540 million.

Davis: Was Mary a good businesswoman?

Rogers: Oh! She could sit in a meeting with ten men, she'd be the only gal, and she'd come up with a better idea than all those men put together. She was smart. And they were jealous! She heard about Walt Disney when she had United Artists, and she said, "Let's get him and make him one of our partners." They said, "Why, those cartoons won't last." She begged them to include Disney. She begged them to start recording, United Artists Records. They said, "Records will never sell," and voted her down. She was brilliant.

Davis: Did World War II decisively affect your work?

Rogers: I had my band up in San Francisco on a Saturday night. I went to the hotel (Mary was there with me), and we were awakened Sunday morning at nine o'clock by a telephone call saying, "The Japanese are all the way to San Francisco. Get out of town!" We truly thought they were coming to San Francisco. I had to do four shows that Sunday. I had my seventeen-piece orchestra on the stage. I went to the theater at twelve or twelve-thirty, and we didn't know what to do, we had no idea. Everyone was scared to death. The musicians were tuning up backstage; the curtain was down. I said, "We'll have to pretend, we'll have to go through with the first show." So the musicians got on the set, and I started playing the theme song. The curtain went up, and I looked out into this 3,000-seat theater. There were about four Japanese sitting in the theater. I thought, "This is it. This is the end." So the next day I signed up for the Navy Air Corps. I was gone four years, and I lost contact with the entertainment business and they lost contact with me. So Mary said, "Why don't you help produce pictures for United Artists?" It was a beautiful idea. I had no knowledge of production, had never thought about it. I was always in the musical end of the business. So I took on a partner, Ralph Cohn, Harry Cohn's son. We started making low-budget pictures—$100,000, $150,000 programmers. Most theaters had to have two films at that time. We made six of those, and they all made money. We thought, "We're ready now for the big stuff." So we tried the million dollar films, and we didn't have such good luck.

Davis: Give me an example of one of those million dollar pictures.

Rogers: *Sleep My Love* with Claudette Colbert and Don Ameche. It was a good picture for that time, but it just didn't make money.

Davis: In between producing were you also doing some acting?

Rogers: Yes. I remember the last film I made was called *The Parson and the Outlaw.* I said, "I'm going to produce it and finance it myself." So I did. It was great fun.

Davis: Why did you decide to leave filmmaking?

Rogers: I had taken quite a loss. I lost a lot of my own personal money. It's kind of hard to lose money you had put in the bank. *Sleep My Love* took a big loss. That kind of cooled me on pictures. If it had been the other way, if money had been coming in, I'd still be doing it.

Davis: Had the industry changed by that time?

Rogers: It was changing. It was in the process of changing—not knowing who was on first base or whether studios had contract people or what.

Davis: It was a scramble. The big studios were already declining. Are you still enthusiastic about the industry?

Rogers: Not about some of these new films. They're different. Mary only allowed a kiss on the cheek. That's as far as any leading man ever got with her.

Davis: As you think back, would you say your Hollywood experience has been gratifying for you, or was your mother right that you should have stayed in Olathe?

Rogers: Oh, I wouldn't have missed this trip out here for anything. I've been able to meet all these people, travel, I've been able to play golf a lot. No, I've loved it, being a part of so many intelligent, beautiful people. I've just loved it. KH

12. United Artists Corporation was formed in 1919 by Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Charles Chaplin, and D. W. Griffith.