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BOOK REVIEW

The power of softness

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FEVER: The Life and Music of Miss Peggy Lee, by Peter Richmond. Henry Holt, 449 pp., $30.

Song is produced by breath, by the inflation of the lungs, pushing air across the vocal folds. This vibration, shaped by the tongue and lips, finally issues out of the body as music. But is that all there is?

For Peggy Lee, it was everything. The smallest sigh from the smoky-voiced chanteuse spoke volumes. In "Fever," his comprehensive new biography of one of the most celebrated jazz-pop vocalists, Peter Richmond avidly traces the evolution of that signature sexy hush.

Born in North Dakota in 1920, Norma Deloris Egstrom grew up shy with what she called "excessive poundage." As a teenager, she fled a grim existence with an abusive stepmother and an alcoholic father to sing on Fargo radio stations. Before she was 20, she had left the plains altogether to become Peggy Lee, performing regularly at the Doll House in Palm Springs, Calif. A nerve-racking show in 1939 for a rambunctious crowd, including boisterous Jack Benny, led to a critical revelation. "She decided not to try to sing over the noise, but under it," Richmond writes. "In a moment of intense fear," Lee said in an interview, "I discovered the power of softness."

Her "minimal, held-back kind of styling" came into its own when she signed on as the biggest big-band leader's "canary" from 1941 to 1943, the apex of swing. "It was under the auspices of Benny Goodman that her trademark economy - of volume, of movement - really began to take hold," notes Richmond, who incisively pinpoints the emergence of her semispoken approach to lyrics. Lee extended that restraint beyond voice to gesture, another strategy to combat stage fright. What began as shyness - sidelong glances, secretive smiles - would become sultry mystique. Introversion was turned into intimacy, subterfuge into style. Soon, the exquisitely soulful "Why Don't You Do Right?" would make her a star.

Strangely, Richmond's footing falters once the singer finds her form. This may be because Lee is a complicated subject, conflicted by fame, career, family, creative drive and insecurity. After leaving Goodman's band, she married guitarist Dave Barbour and settled in Los Angeles, but she didn't stay still. She acted, painted and wrote poetry. She was a lyricist in her own right, penning the songs for Disney's "The Lady and the Tramp" as well as collaborating with Duke Ellington, Steve Allen, Dave Grusin and others. A ravenous spiritual curiosity led her to the Institute of Religious Science and transcendental meditation. Richmond details the sold-out club shows; the appearances on Bing Crosby's radio program; the incredible success of "Black Coffee," one of the era's most acclaimed jazz vocal albums; and the "elegant spareness" of her signature song, "Fever." And then there were more marriages, fainting spells, late-night phone calls, dirty jokes, runs in Las Vegas,

an unfortunate one-woman show and a spectacular flame-out at the Nixon White House.

With success came myriad friends, musicians and critics, and Richmond has included many of their perspectives. The tale of recording Leiber and Stoller's "Is That All There Is?," inspired by a Thomas Mann short story, is well-rendered, but some accounts are lost in the long sweep of Lee's life; others compete in a cacophonous confusion.

Many of the scattered anecdotes focus on her exacting demands on bands and stage crews - exhausting rehearsals, extensive lighting cues. Other recollections touch on her feelings about her body. Lee was obsessed with doctors, illnesses and vitamin shots. It is not a throwaway line when she responds to a 1954 interview about a stretch of bad press: "When you like music, what are you going to do? It's a disease."

Richmond notes this particular theme, but never applies the same level of acuity that he does to her vocal styling. He skims the surface, as if it might be indecorous to linger on the face-lifts, the diabetes and the oxygen tank ("Charlie") that accompanied Lee in her later years. But this type of restraint does not serve the book well. Such a light tread leaves only a blur.

Lee definitely had a body even though she might have wanted to escape it. She was a woman who turned "hourglass" into a verb, and yet "hadn't learned how to swing her body in the rhythm." Her flesh was solid, possibly too solid, which may be why her sound isn't even liquid: It's simply air. Still, even if Richmond doesn't deeply probe these complexities, he takes us instead to that disembodied voice, to those vibrations hanging in the air. In the end, that is all there is, and it is what matters most.

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