

# Personal recollections of Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy

By STEVE COHEN

Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald were two of the biggest motion picture stars of the 1930s. They became famous as “the Singing Sweethearts,” crooning romantic duets in sentimental operetta movies.

Their films were adaptations of Broadway shows by the composers Noel Coward, Cole Porter, Victor Herbert, Sigmund Romberg and Rudolph Friml — such as *Naughty Marietta*, *Rose Marie*, *Maytime*, *Firefly*, *Rosalie*, *Sweethearts*, *New Moon* and *Bitter Sweet*.

Although known for this lightweight fare, they also sang opera. Speaking with me a few days before his death from a stroke at the age of 65, Eddy said “I’d like to be remembered for my serious work instead of just that silly June-moon-spoon stuff. I had a good serious career before I hit the movies. Then things changed and I had to sing songs like ‘Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life’ and ‘Rose Marie, I Love You,’ and these songs are the ones that are most requested. I hope that, after I’m gone, people will remember me for more than that.”



In the middle of his nightclub act at the Sans Souci Hotel in Florida in March of 1967, Eddy froze. Then he said to the audience, “Would you bear with me a moment? I can’t seem to get the words out. My face is getting numb. Is there a doctor here?” He was helped off stage and was pronounced dead at a hospital a few hours later.

Eddy sang Amonosro in *Aida*, Escamillo in *Carmen*, the title role in *Gianni Schicchi* and two dozen other opera roles from Mozart to Wagner. Women liked him for his blonde good looks — and not just the ladies in the audience. Female singers who worked with him adored him too. Irra Petina, who starred in *The Song of Norway*, spoke of how Eddy was “a sweetheart” and a pleasure to work with. And opera singer Rose Bampton said “He was the ideal for all of us. We were very much in love with him. He was the handsomest person and he was a very dear person.”

MacDonald sang on Broadway first, and opera later. She was born in West Philadelphia in 1903. Jeanette took dancing and singing lessons and performed at church and school functions and began touring in kiddie shows at the age of nine. In 1920 she appeared in two musicals, Jerome Kern's *Night Boat* as a chorus replacement, and *Irene* on the road as the second female lead. She also had the second female lead in George Gershwin's *Tip Toes*, and *Bubblin' Over*, then the star roles in *Yes, Yes, Yvette* (1927), *Sunny Days* (1928) and *Boom Boom* (1929).

She went to Hollywood and starred opposite Maurice Chevalier in *The Love Parade* in 1929 and *The Vagabond King* opposite Dennis King in 1930. MacDonald made eleven more Hollywood films before Eddy made his movie debut. She started concert tours in the 1930s in between films. Her opera appearances came towards the end of her career, in *Faust* and *Romeo et Juliette*. MacDonald toured in summer stock productions of *Bitter Sweet* and *The King and I* between 1954 and 1959.

Nelson Eddy was born in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1901. He moved to Philadelphia in his teens and became a journalist, writing for the *Public Ledger* and the *Evening Bulletin* for five years. He took singing lessons and gave his first recital in Philadelphia in 1928 when he was 26 years old. Then he became a frequent performer with the Philadelphia Civic Opera — 58 performances between 1925 and 1931.



Eddy told me how he made his debut with Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1932. "I met Stokowski socially once or twice when he was a hero to all Philadelphia music lovers — this white-haired god who just seemed to rule the town and we just all bowed before him. One time in 1931 he called me up and asked if I would make an audition for Schoenberg's *Gurre-Lieder*. And I quick ran out and bought a copy of the *Gurre-Lieder*. I didn't know what it was. I learned it and went up there and his pianist played.

"Stokowski signed me up and as I was going out the door, he said "By the way, you don't know *Wozzeck* do you?" and I said 'Yes.' And he was surprised and he said 'Why do you know it?' And I said 'I learn everything that I hear you're going to do just in case I'm asked to do it.' 'Well,' he said, 'this I must hear.' So we went through *Wozzeck* and he said, 'Well, you've got that job too.' *Wozzeck* by Alban Berg, the Drum Major role, and that was my first and only performance of opera in New York."

When Stokowski decided to do Wagner's *Parsifal* in 1933 he again turned to Nelson Eddy. "He asked me to do the role of Gurnemanz," Eddy told me. "And there were three long acts and he did not want to make any cuts so he took three days to do it. The complete opera would be about four hours, plus intermissions, and you can't make orchestra concerts that long so Stokowski did each act separately. Stokowski dared to do off-casting. I wasn't a typical Gurnemanz. I was a baritone. Gurnemanz is a heavy Wagnerian bass but he put me in it because he thought I had something in my voice that fitted the nature of the part."



Eddy and MacDonald were paired as the leads of the Hollywood film *Naughty Marietta* in 1933 and they starred in *Rose Marie* a year later. During the shooting of that movie, in Lake Tahoe, the two started a passionate romance according to author Sharon Rich. She quotes from Eddy's diary to prove her thesis. She also says that Jeanette became pregnant and studio boss Louis B. Mayer forced her to have an abortion.

But many MacDonald-Eddy fans dispute this. They say it couldn't be true. MacDonald had a romantic involvement with her manager, Bob Ritchie, and she also began dating actor Gene Raymond, who resembled Nelson Eddy.

In 1937, MacDonald married Raymond. Eddy sang at their wedding. Perhaps on the rebound, Eddy married Ann Franklin, a woman older than he, with a teenaged son. Rich alleges that Jeanette and Nelson continued a relationship after both were married, and she had additional pregnancies and abortions.

Those who debunk this say that it is disrespectful to suggest that two fine people could have been unfaithful to their spouses. On the other hand, if such a long-term affair happened, Eddy and MacDonald appear very human and sympathetic.

The song-writing team of Robert Wright and George Forrest met the singers in Hollywood in 1935. “Nelson Eddy was a very good-looking man,” Wright told me. “He had what we called ‘Nelson Eddy grey,’ a unique hair color — I never saw anyone else whose hair was quite that color — sort of blondish golden grey, almost like platinum. He was a very intelligent man with a good sense of humor. Nelson was one of the most professional men we ever worked with. Couldn’t have been nicer.”

They also enjoyed working with MacDonald, whose name they pronounced “JA-net, with the accent on the first syllable, as many of her friends called her. “She was a beautiful woman, with a classic face, not glamorous in a Hollywood way but appealing.” Conductor Sylvan Levin commented that she had a different look from other stars of the 1930s: “She was bustier than Garbo, Shearer, Loy and others. They covered her up and never let her wear anything revealing. She didn’t flaunt herself like later stars like Rita Hayworth and Marilyn Monroe, but she was very attractive.”



Wright and Forrest were hired to write for the third Eddy-MacDonald movie, *Maytime*, in 1937, and they concocted an opera scene to allow Eddy and MacDonald to utilize their talents in that area. “We said we can’t write our own opera; we’re not trained for that, but we can adapt some famous composer’s music. The costume designer said he wanted to dress Jeanette in a Cossack outfit because it would be flattering to her rather wide face, so we said alright, let’s match the outfit and pick a Russian composer. We’ll take Tchaikovsky’s Fifth Symphony and adapt it for voice and write romantic words for it.”

MacDonald died in 1964 at the age of 61 of heart ailments. Eddy remained married to Ann but spent most of the last decade of his life performing on tour with Gale Sherwood, an attractive singer. She was on stage with him when he suffered the stroke that killed him in 1967.