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Very few bad apples, mostly friendly folks



Jim Spittle

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— Mary Bonnell

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chewing snafus. Spittle recalls when Meadow Brook had booked one of the first laser shows, "Space, Music and Lasers" in 1978.

The show used trucks to transport equipment from booking to booking and they ran on a tight timetable. The snafu arose because three cities in the United States happen to be named Rochester — the home of the Meadow Brook Music Festival in Michigan, another in New York and a third in Minnesota.

The driver of one of the trucks loaded with laser gear hopped in his cab and drove all the way to Rochester, Minn., before he realized he'd gone to the wrong Rochester. Spittle remembers the nervous afternoon spent waiting for the wayward truck to arrive so the crew could set up for that evening's show.

"It arrived very late in the day," he recalls. "Another time we went to pick up equipment that had gone to Rochester, N.Y. We have to be very careful and be sure they know we're in Rochester, Michigan," and he stresses the Michigan.

When Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg, a popular classical violinist, ran into bad weather in Aspen, she had to take a much later flight than scheduled. Neither Nadja nor the DSO wanted to go on without a chance to rehearse tricky passages, but the later flight cut severely into planned rehearsal time. Spittle solved the problem by renting a helicopter to speed her from the airport to rehearsal.

The chopper pilot met her at the gate at Metro airport, flew her to the parking lot opposite Meadow Brook Theatre where Spittle met her in a car and whisked her, under police escort, to rehearsal.

Spittle says, "She didn't know anything about all this and had already had a horrendous day when a chopper pilot she'd never seen before met her plane and told her to get into this helicopter." After a brief rehearsal with the orchestra, she promptly got sick and went to sleep, but her performance that night was good."

BONNELL REMEMBERS When Debbie Boone discovered one hour before show time that she'd lost a silver shoe she needed to go with the gown she wore in performance. She sent a panicked SOS to Bonnell.

Because most stores had closed by that hour, Mary raided the costume collection of Meadow Brook Theatre. In the nick of time, she found a pair of silver shoes and luck was on her side — they were the right size.

Luck, however, deserted her completely when guest conductor Neville Marriner's performance suit got locked in the dry cleaners.

Marriner had conducted on a hot Thursday night and Bonnell offered to have his suit cleaned before his next performance on Sunday. She admits she completely forgot Saturday to pick up his clothes at the cleaners

although she wishes she could repress the memory.

"The owner was up north and couldn't be reached so I called the police, but they couldn't get in so Mr. Marriner had to wear an ill-fitting jacket for his performance. He was so good natured about it," she recalled.

"It was his custom to wear a black silk handkerchief in his breast pocket for good luck. He thought a black sock more fitting to his borrowed jacket and stuck one in the pocket before he went to stage," she added.

Bonnell and Spittle try to accommodate requests of visiting artists because they understand the frustrations of life on the road. "Performers live out of suitcases. It's not the glamorous life everyone thinks," Bonnell says. "All they see is the inside of airplanes, the inside of hotel rooms and the inside of dressing rooms."

The Meadow Brook staffs spends an eight- to 12-hour day with guest artists while they set up sound, lights and stage equipment, rehearse, and adjust the monitor mix on the sound system the way the performer likes it. The festival often provides food for the artists and their crews. "You can't have Sammy Davis Jr. popping into Bill Knapps to have a burger," Bonnell added.

Typical fare includes cereal, fruit and Danish for breakfast, a deli tray salad, sandwiches or grilled hot dogs for lunch and a good but not elaborate dinner because the festival's kitchen facilities are limited.

EVERY PERFORMER'S CONTRACT specifies details of what the dressing room will contain and what the music festival agrees to provide the cast and crew. Most performers spell out their special requests in a contract rider that can get down to details as specific as the color of towels in the dressing room and the brands of drinks in the refrigerator.

Sammy Davis Jr. requests Strawberry Crush because it makes his tongue red when he performs. When he came to Meadow Brook, he wanted four cases of it for himself and his crew. "We had to go to Ohio to get it," Bonnell remembers.

Johnny Mathis drinks Dom Perignon champagne and Judy Collins likes chicken soup made absolutely without salt. Restaurant kitchens just don't make soup without any salt, so Bonnell cooked up a batch at home for her. The story doesn't end there. When a driver picked up the soup at Mary's house to bring it to the festival, it spilled in the car and left a perfectly saltless mess to clean up.

Joan Baez eats health food and asked to have granola and fresh fruit grown without pesticides in her dressing room, but she included a sweet loophole in her healthy regime — she also wanted a two-pound box of chocolates.

When Stephen Stills was performing on his own a few years back before reuniting with Crosby and Nash,

his contract rider listed a menu for every day of the week. Entertainers may perform in a different town every night and they risk being served almost identical menus day after day. Good as it is, chicken gets boring six days a week, so Stephen Stills spelled out a solution in his contract.

Very few bad apples show up at Meadow Brook Music Festival. Bonnell remembers fending off the advances of one who will remain unnamed. She called him a "sleazeball comedian who backed me in a corner and covered my face with kisses."

Spittle comments that some Rock and Roll bands have made exorbitant requests for Courvoisier Cognac and imported beers and members of a band, which will also remain nameless, behaved like slob and didn't endear themselves to the festival staff.

Except for a very few rude entertainers, both Bonnell and Spittle say most artists are "everyday" folks. Spittle says, "Entertaining just happens to be what they do for a living." Which is not to say they're just like the folks next door. "Their working environment doesn't breed normality," Spittle says but he praises the many decent, friendly people he's gotten to know.

Entertainers may be in Rochester for only a day or so at a time, but the long, intense day working and eating together cements friendships, especially when entertainers return year after year.

Bonnell counts Tony Bennett and Andy Williams among others, as genuine friends. She threw a 60th birthday party for Tony last year and often runs Andy's son to the "golden arches" when he has a Big Mac attack.

The upbeat side of the business far outweighs its negatives because the people are nice. Spittle enjoys the old time friendliness of Country and Western stars such as Emmy Lou Harris and Reba McEntyre and their crews. "They're smiling, friendly and gracious. They treat everyone as their friend." Donny and Marie Osmond travel with a huge entourage of family including brothers and lots of children. "They're a lovely, wholesome family," Bonnell says, "but it's chaotic and it seems like there's never enough food for all of them."

Star stories spill out of both Bonnell and Spittle. Once tale leads to an even better one as they recall their years catering to the entertainers at the Meadow Brook Music Festival.

Jim now works as assistant to the general director of Meadow Brook Theatre where he worries about things other than late airplanes and sound system snafus.

After 12 summers on the job, a successor will take over Mary's exhausting, but fascinating job as hostess to the stars, but she'll continue as costume director for Meadow Brook Theatre during the fall and winter season.