

Below is the full article of the feature, “DESTINED FOR SHOW BIZ,” that appears in the 2011 Edition of *Yours in Song*, the annual newsletter of Purdue Musical Organizations.

DESTINED FOR SHOW BIZ While most PMO alums graduate and pursue careers in fields completely unrelated to music, a select few seem destined for show business. When J. Peter Smith was in 4th grade, his teacher, Sister Rose Bernadette, heard him sing and took him straight to the music teacher, Sister Joanne. It was the beginning of a life filled with song.

Peter initially enrolled in Purdue in 1942 with the intent to become an engineer. He rushed several fraternities, including Delta Upsilon, Al Stewart’s fraternity. The DU’s introduced him to Al and PMO. Peter’s initial tenure at Purdue was short-lived. In 1943 he was enlisted in the Army Specialized Training Reserve Program. Following his 18th birthday in 1944, he went to basic training and then joined the 100th Infantry Division in combat overseas. Only a few months after his deployment, Peter and a friend were captured by the Germans. They spent five months in various prison camps, and after one failed attempt, were finally able to escape. Peter was awarded two battle stars, a Silver Star, a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart for his combat experiences.

Peter returned to Purdue in 1946, but was no longer interested in becoming an engineer. Al Stewart encouraged him to join a brand new degree program in the School of P.E. called “Industrial Recreation and Music.” “Mickey McGuire and I were the first two students to enroll in that school!” Peter recalls. “Frankly, PMO was my major.” Peter was a regularly featured soloist and Al Stewart never tired of telling his “war story.” “It got more embellished with each time he would introduce me at a concert!”

During his time at Purdue, Peter met and married his wife, Lois, with whom he had six children. His favorite memories of the Glee Club include performing at President Harry Truman’s inauguration in 1948 and playing the “Red Shadow” in “The Desert Song” where he almost fell into the orchestra pit, tripping over his sword! Peter also made many wonderful, lasting friendships and connections which led him further down the path to show business.

In 1947, Peter’s senior year, the Glee Club performed for the Indiana Club of Chicago. In the audience was Mr. Glen Hillis, a noted and wealthy lawyer from Kokomo. Mr. Hillis had previously sponsored students in the Indiana University School of Law, his alma mater. He also had a daughter, Margaret, pursuing a career in music in New York, however, and her experiences sparked his interest in sponsoring a student interested in a career in the entertainment industry. He was seated with Dr. Frank Hockema, then Vice President at Purdue, and asked if he knew of any Glee Clubbers interested in a career in music. Dr. Hockema recommended Peter! He was sent to “audition” with Margaret in New York. She gave Peter a big “thumbs up” but said, although he had talent, he needed more training. Thus, Peter ended up at IU to study music and Mr. Hillis provided him and his family financial assistance.

From IU, Peter began auditioning in New York. His big break was playing the understudy for “Lt. Joe Cable” in “South Pacific” on Broadway. He went on to star in two other

Broadway productions, in addition to many other theatrical productions, TV shows and commercials. As his family grew, he opted for a career in management. His accomplishments include running a summer stock theatre in Cohasset, MA, and the first summer season at the Metropolitan Opera. Peter also had the opportunity to work for noted Broadway musical composer, director and playwright, Frank Loesser. It was a rewarding and educational experience. "When I left Frank, I told him I should have paid him tuition instead of his paying me a salary." Peter spent the final 25 years of his career as a talent agent, representing a bevy of major stage and screen stars, including many who are still active in their careers, like Denzel Washington, Hector Elizondo and Florence Henderson.

"All of this blessed life started at Purdue through Al Stewart and finally Dr. Frank Hockema and Glen R. Hillis." Several years ago, Peter and Lois, made a deferred gift to Purdue in order to establish a scholarship fund for PMO students in memory of Dr. Hockema and Mr. Hillis. When Peter landed his first job, he thanked Mr. Hillis for all his support and also asked how he could repay Mr. Hillis. His answer was, "Just do the same for someone else when you can."

"And that is the reason why PMO received the donation that Lois and I made in Mr. Hillis' and Dr. Hockema's name. Without Purdue and these great men, I probably would have ended up in an Indiana high school as a football coach and music teacher!"