

RUTH MARX | 1935-2021

Sang backup for son Richard Marx after big-band and jingles career

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Tom Hanks met singer Ruth Marx when he was having dinner with her and her musician son Richard Marx. He asked her to tell him about herself.

She began singing a TV commercial jingle that became an earworm for generations of consumers: "Ask any mermaid you happen to see, what's the best tuna?" she sang.

Hanks jumped up and completed the line: "Chicken of the Sea!"

"He starts singing along with her, and he says, 'Oh, my goodness, Ruth, you're a goddess,'" her son said.

Mrs. Marx's honeyed voice was heard on many of the TV commercial jingles her husband Dick Marx composed for products that also included Doublemint gum, Kellogg's Raisin Bran, Peter Pan peanut butter, Ken-L Ration dog food and Virginia Slims cigarettes.

Richard Marx said she died Aug. 24 of lung cancer at his California home. She was 85.

Mrs. Marx went on the road with him and sang on his recordings, including the single "Streets of Pain."

The backup singers were "just screaming the chorus," said Marx, who'd proudly tell people, "That's my mom."

"She was always so fun to be around," he said. And "she was a really, really wonderful singer."

Growing up in a family of seven kids in East Liverpool, Ohio, "She knew her ticket out was her voice," her son said.

Her father Duane was a steelworker. Her mother Lois worked in a pottery factory. At one point in 1948 — during post-World War II housing shortages — the Guildoos lived in a tent at a campsite, cooking on a kerosene stove and carrying water from a spring while fighting off the mosquitoes, her hometown paper once wrote.

At East Liverpool High, she performed in talent shows and plays. She started touring with big bands.

"She made her way to Chicago because she heard about this vocal coach," her son said.

The coach was Dick Marx, whose Dick Marx Trio played at places like Mister Kelly's and the Palmer House during the city's nightclub heyday.

In Chicago, she went through some lean years and odd jobs. She stayed at a YMCA and worked in a physician's office where "the doctor would harass her and chase her around," her son said, often getting by on chicken noodle soup and crackers.

"And there were times," he said, "she didn't have money for anything but the crackers."

She started studying with Dick Marx. She'd say he "taught me more about phrasing and singing with emotion than anyone."

After his first marriage ended, they were married in 1961. He formed a commercial music company, writing jingles including "Double your pleasure, double your fun" for Doublemint, "You've come a long way, baby" for Virginia Slims, "My dog's bigger than your dog" for Ken-L Ration, "Two scoops of raisins in a package of Kellogg's Raisin Bran" and "If you believe in peanut butter, you gotta believe in Peter Pan." He also wrote "Here Come the Hawks" for the Blackhawks and the theme for Siskel and Ebert's "At the Movies."

Mrs. Marx sang on many of his spots. She also sang on a 1970s commercial for Quasar TV.

She was a versatile singer who could convey the mood of a jingle, said singer Don Shelton, who worked with her on many commercials.

After raising their son in Lake Bluff, the Marxes moved to California as his musical career took off. She ran her son's fan club. Her husband worked on music for the Hanks movie "A League of Their Own," among other projects.

"She became a full-time grandma," their son said. "She was on the floor playing with my three boys no matter what they wanted to do. She would play Army men with them. She



Singer Ruth Marx
PROVIDED PHOTOS



Young Ruth Guildoo Marx.



Ruth Marx's singing career captivated actor Tom Hanks (right).

would play Star Wars."

Later, Mrs. Marx and her husband had a home in Hawthorn Woods. He died in 1997.

She enjoyed the singing of Doris Day, Julie London, Jo Stafford and Sarah Vaughan. She and her husband loved the song "Our Love Is Here to Stay."

Mrs. Marx liked shopping at Saks Fifth Avenue and wearing Jungle Gardenia perfume.

"She was really poor, and, when she started making money," her son said, "she spoiled herself."

He said she "was an incredibly generous gift-giver, everything from beautiful gifts to

paying off somebody's house.

"I thanked her many times for being this incredible mother. I said, 'You were my best friend but also my confidante.'"

"Every day, she said, 'Who's had a better life than me?'"

He, his three sons and his wife, Daisy Fuentes Marx, plan to celebrate her life by watching family videos and toasting Mrs. Marx with her favorite Prosecco.

In her final days, he said he played his mother a song he wrote in 1998 titled "Thanks to You." It includes the line: "I am who I am, Mama, thanks to you."