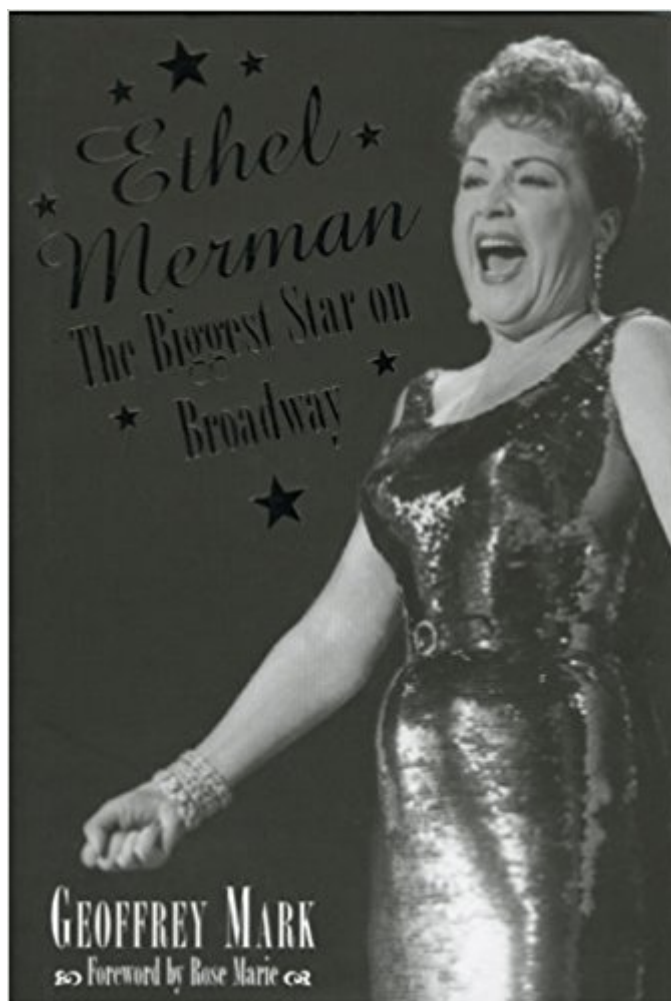


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# Ethel Merman: The Biggest Star On Broadway



## Synopsis

For nearly three decades Ethel Merman virtually guaranteed Broadway success. This in-depth portrait details her career, marriages, affairs, and her children. It includes a complete glossary of all of Merman's appearances.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Ethel Merman is the one name most associated with the Broadway musical. She easily ranks as the Biggest Star on Broadway. Lusty, lively and lavish, Merman had a magnetic personality that caused audiences to be riveted on her. *Ethel Merman: the Biggest Star on Broadway* tells the story of a fabulous star; a woman who made it to the top of her profession at a time when most women were home taking care of their families. Merman's life and career is a microcosm of the history of show business. With a voice that rang like a church bell and a talent for timing that the best comedians of her day envied, Ethel was a star all the way. She knew and worked with the great names emblazoned in the entertainment pantheon: These included Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, Stephen Sondheim, Al Jolson, Eddie Cantor, Jimmy Durante, Frank Sinatra, Bob Hope, Tallulah Bankhead, Mar Martin, Bert Lahr, Judy Garland, Marilyn Monroe, Lucille Ball, Barbra Streisand, and Johnny Carson. While singing her way to superstardom, Ethel Merman suffered the humiliation of an illicit affair with a famous married man, four disastrous marriages, and the loss of loved ones to drug overdose and murder. Not only does this book tell never before told details of her tempestuous and brief marriage to Ernest Borgnine and the death of her daughter, it allows the reader to go inside the

mind of one of the true pioneers of modern show business. Whether starring in fifteen legendary Broadway musicals and more than a dozen motion pictures, or making hundreds of radio and television appearances, Ethel Merman was always fearless and focused. She introduced Cole Porter's "You're the Top" and, indeed, she was the top.

Geoffrey Mark is a walking encyclopedia of show business history. Born in Brooklyn, NY and raised all over the country, Mr. Mark has worked as an actor, singer, stand-up comedian, radio host, and Grammy nominated writer. He writes and produces documentaries and reality shows for cable television. He lives in Los Angeles, CA.

For such a colorful woman, it's amazing that this is the first true biography of her. More than twenty years after her death, her name still rings out for us and the title of the book is still apt. People of all ages know "The Merm." Or they know the shows of "The Merm." The most disappointing aspect of this book is that the author doesn't seem at all interesting in helping us understand those shows. The fact of their existence is enough to pass the time. Stories that have become part of the lore (hating Fernando Lamas, the criss-cross names for billing) are coming and Mark doesn't add anything to them. He does not ever delve into any of the shows, providing historical information on what it was like to be at a Merman show, to experience Merman as a performer. There is not even any dissection of the shows. To hear Mark tell it, *Happy Hunting* may have been as big a hit as *Call Me Madam*. The difference is barely discussed, and *Gypsy* gets even shorter shrift, except to tell us how exhausting it was for her. As far as her personal life, Mark is again content to revel in a few juicy tidbits (the Loretta Young story has been around for years) and tries to force others into seeming juicy, but he doesn't seem to have found anything new. I have heard stories from people who knew Merman that would have made ideal insertions here, instructive as to her personality and just plain funny. If I could have heard these stories casually over the years, Mark could have found them as well. That's the problem. Mark seems to have done no research at all. He's condensing an astounding life into less than 200 pages without adding anything of his own. He's merely collecting bits of information that exist other places without doing any real research of his own to deepen or clarify this fascinating subject. Though Merman's autobiography is howlingly inaccurate, it remains the best piece we have about her, for at least it does detail SOME information now and then. Merman still deserves a ripe, full and complex account of her life. She shouldn't still be deserving it, not after all of these years. It should have been done already, but another opportunity has passed by unfulfilled.

This is a ghastly book. Ethel Merman deserves better. Leaving aside all the errors in grammar and punctuation, and the endless repetition of phrases and words, there is little to admire in this book. Ironically, Geoffrey Mark, enthusiastically thanks his editor in an early chapter. For what? Had this been a student paper I would have handed it back full of red ink. Among the many glaring problems with grammar, the most obvious is the lack of footnotes. Story after story, anecdote after anecdote are repeated with no attribution. There are those who would consider this plagiarism, but apparently the folks at Barricade Books do not. The author criticizes the other books on Merman that are out there, at the same time helping himself liberally to everything that is in them. For example, in Merman's autobiography she writes that she bled "like a stuck pig" during a filming accident in Hollywood in the 1930s. Mark uses the same exact words to describe the same incident. More than 90 percent of what you read has been written before and is available from previously published sources and from the Internet. Mark makes astounding claims, such as Merman's birthday really being 1906 and not 1908, and does not bother to substantiate this claim or reveal his source material. Another odd claim is that she sang with the Ziegfeld Follies in 1934 and that a recording exists. Sure the recording is out there, but no one has ever written that it is Ethel Merman. People have written that it "sounds" like Merman, but another singer is always credited. Another odd claim is that one of the songs from "Call Me Madam" was recorded in 1955 and not at the time of the original Decca recording. The recording dates, which have been published, do not substantiate that fact. As a further example of the inaccuracy of the author, he writes that Merman first did the television program, "The Match Game" between 1967 and 1969. The show aired for the first time in 1973. These are facts that would have been easy to check and correct. It is also interesting to note that there are no quotations from Ethel Merman's son or her grandchildren. It is quite unusual that there are no contributions from these individuals. The author has a rather odd fascination with Merman's hairstyles, her weight, her breasts, her sex life, her gowns and her makeup, while revealing little of her magic as a performer. He uses the words "point her massive breasts" in two consecutive paragraphs in an early chapter of the book. Why could not an editor have caught this? There is also a great lack of critical commentary in this book. We get no idea of what critics thought of Ethel Merman and why she was so successful as a performer. And the author's habit of referring to Ethel Merman as Miss Zimm, Mermo, the Merm, Mermsky, etc etc does not make for scholarly reading. Also the author doesn't have much knowledge of vocal terminology. He misuses the terms "quaver" and "vibrato" continuously, even going so far as to say that Merman had a "quaver in her vibrato" -- which makes no sense. Throughout the book the author is coy towards his subject and

rather disrespectful, openly criticizing Merman for her behavior and condemning her for things she did or did not do during her career. The author is an arm chair psychologist and offers many (unfounded) observations about his subject, including a supposed "oral fixation" that he felt was part of Merman's psyche. On the same token the author does stick up for Merman when he states that she wasn't the "bitch" that she was supposed to be, but that doesn't give him the liberty of telling the reader all the mistakes Merman made with her life and how could have done better by doing this or that. What does work, and the only thing that does work in this book, is the detailed analysis Mark offers of Merman's radio, film, television appearances and recordings. Despite some factual errors, this is an interesting section and well written. It is a shame the rest of the book isn't like this. I am told that there is to be a scholarly treatment of Merman's life to published at a later date. That would be a welcome "antitode" to this gossipy and in the long run very silly book. Very very disappointing. Would give it zero stars if I could.

After hearing for years that Geoffrey Mark Fidelman (he dropped the last name for this book) was writing a biography of Ethel Merman, I was very excited to purchase this book from . I read it in one afternoon and was more than disappointed. First of all this is not ancient Egypt and information can be checked and double checked at this point in time. The author lists the actresses who starred in film versions of Merman's shows and then makes mistakes such as Ann Miller appearing in "Take A Chance" (it was Lillian Roth) and Martha Raye doing "Red, Hot, And Blue. (this was Betty Hutton but not a film version of the Cole Porter show!) It should also be added that not one film, show, television, or song title appears in the index AND the index pages in many cases don't match up when you attempt to look up a name. The recordings are also incomplete in that he does not list her test recordings of the songs from "Girl Crazy" or her other deleted song from "Alexander's Ragtime Band". For the record this was " Slumming On Park Avenue"! Discographies with this information are easily obtainable. He also tells us that the radio and television listing is incomplete because " too many have been lost to history". I have programs in my collection that are not even listed so he should have tried a little harder. The shows and films she appeared in are given short shrift in favor of discussing Merman's sex life which is very crassly outlined in some detail. Why a so-called expert would take this course in writing a book about some one he knows ALL about is beyond me and does an insult to his subject and to the readers as well. The definitive Merman book has yet to be written and we have waited to long to have a crude account like this one.

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