



Traps, the Drum Wonder: The Life of Buddy Rich

Mel Tormé

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Mel Tormé is world renowned as a leading jazz vocalist. He has performed in MGM musicals, co-wrote one of the enduring Christmas classics, "The Christmas Song (Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire)," and was recently profiled in *Life* magazine as one of the greatest living jazz singers. But Tormé has also written five books, including *The Other Side of the Rainbow*, Tormé's account of his year working on the Judy Garland television show--considered the best portrait of Garland ever written. In this book, Tormé writes a brilliant biography of his friend of forty years--the drummer Buddy Rich.

Buddy Rich was one of the most famous drummers of the Swing Era, having starred in the Artie Shaw and Tommy Dorsey bands. After World War II he successfully led several of his own bands. Born into a vaudeville family, Buddy performed on the drums in his parents' act before he was two years old--where he was billed as "Traps, the Drum Wonder"--and became the highest paid child performer in the world by age four. This early fame--and Buddy's abusive father--left psychological scars on Rich, who developed an abrasive personality, and would beat his drums as an outlet for his frustrations. Although a close friend and admirer, Tormé pulls no punches when it comes to describing Rich's occasional outbursts and his sometimes childish pranks. But, as Tormé shows, Buddy could also be charming, affectionate, and funny, as he demonstrated during his frequent appearances as a guest on the *Tonight* show. (When Rich died, Johnny Carson proclaimed, "The world lost a genius, and I lost a friend.") We also find tales of Buddy's stormy friendship with Frank Sinatra (his first roommate on tour with the Tommy Dorsey band), and his romance with Lana Turner (Buddy's first serious love affair).

More than anything, of course, Rich was a brilliant musician, and he earned many tributes from jazz musicians ("What Buddy could do with a couple of pieces of wood was uncanny," remembers drummer Alvin Stoller). Tormé shows a deep understanding of the life of a jazzman, and the many challenges and vicissitudes that are involved with it. We learn of the problems of holding a swing band together during an era when bebop ruled, follow Buddy in his search for the perfect snare drum, and observe the many "drum-offs" when Rich proved his unmatched talent in friendly competition with other talented drummers, such as Gene Krupa.

The Buddy Rich story is a fascinating one, as much for what it says about the world of American music and entertainment as for the remarkable life it portrays. Drawing from magazines and many personal reminiscences, Tormé packs this biography with vivid, often funny, anecdotes. His personal touch and his in-depth knowledge of jazz make for a moving, insightful, and often hilarious biography.

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