



One of the last photographs of Clayton (center), Jackson (right) and Clayton play at Jim's home shortly before his death.

PHOTOGRAPH FOR COLLIER'S BY JOHN MCGEE

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A TEAM IS BORN- Clayton, Jackson & Durante

The early 20s were golden years for The Schnozz. He married, got his own night club—and turned comedian, becoming central figure of an act showmen will never forget

By GENE FOWLER

James Francis Durante seemed a poor bet for prosperity. His family was poor; he quit school in the eighth grade to work. Then he learned piano—and headed for fame, via a succession of New York dives and night clubs. At the last of these, he met a girl

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JIMMY DURANTE met Maud Jeanne Olson, who was to become his wife, when they were both in their late twenties and both making their living as entertainers. Their first encounter was not a very auspicious one.

When she entered the Alamo Club in Harlem, where Durante was playing piano and leading a small band, she announced that she was a lyric soprano who had been sent to the Ritz Club for an audition. Besides mistaking the Alamo for the Ritz, which was located nearby, she hit Jimmy on another sore spot, because he had never liked sopranos. "Sopranos and violins always seemed a little bit sissy," he explained some time later. "We wanted noise—brasses and drums, and piano."

Then, when he proceeded to audition Miss Olson anyhow, she complained about his technique as an accompanist. "Whoever told you you could play the piano?" she asked.

His retort became a Durante classic in later years. "Them," he said, "is the conditions that prevail." "She didn't make me mad when she panned my

playing," he once told a friend. "I had to laugh."

That laugh apparently broke the ice, for he hired her, and began to court her soon afterward. "When we finished work, we used to have a little bite to eat, and I'd drop her off at the door of her rooming house. I was really crazy about her."

As for Jeanne's feeling about Jimmy, her friend Jenice Werner said recently: "Jeanne said he walked funny. She used to fall in behind him and imitate him, but he didn't know about it until years afterward. Yet she was mad about him."

Jeanne was born in Toledo, of Swedish, Scotch and French-Canadian ancestry. The Olson family moved to Detroit during Jeanne's childhood. She got her early experience as an entertainer in Midwestern vaudeville houses, singing under the name of Maudie Jeanne. Early in 1918 she went to New York to seek a higher place in the show world.

Her first job was as a singer and dancer in a Schubert production, but she lost that when she sprained her ankle at dress rehearsal.

It was then that she chanced to meet a sympathetic restaurant owner and booking agent named Sigmund Werner, who was to prove a real friend. A jovial Hungarian, Werner supplied talent for famed Broadway restaurants and large hotels in Atlantic City. It was he who gave Rudolph Valentino his first job as a dancer; until then Valentino had been a porter at Bustanoby's Restaurant.

At the Werner restaurant on Thirty-ninth Street, Maudie Jeanne got a job singing. Almost immediately, she lost her voice temporarily because of a cold. Instead of discharging her, Werner made her a cashier, but she showed no skill as a balancer of figures. So if Jeanne was short in her accounts, Werner would conspire to find out just how much, and the proprietor or a friend would surreptitiously drop the right amount in the till.

Almost every night, Werner escorted Jeanne to her rooming house on Fifty-sixth Street, for he did not want her to be molested by mashers. In addition, she was often invited to join Werner, his wife Lillian and daughter Jenice at Sunday dinner, at their home at 150th Street and Riverside Drive.

Jenice Werner remembers Jeanne as a pretty young woman, with large light-brown eyes, reddish brown hair, tiny hands and feet and a shapely mouth. "She had the most beautiful eyelashes you ever saw, and a very sweet way of speaking."

She could also speak very pointedly when the occasion demanded, as Jimmy swiftly discovered. One afternoon she agreed to go with him to the Hippodrome Theatre, famed for its "spectacles." They were to meet at the corner of Forty-third Street and Sixth Avenue; when she arrived, she found him wearing a cap and a turtle-neck sweater.

"Are you going to the show with me?" she asked. (Continued on page 56)



Maud Jeanne Olson—"Toots" to Jimmy—as she looked at the time she married Durante Collier's for July 7, 1951



The Durante troupe in action. Singer Eddie Jackson at left; Jimmy in the center; dancer Lou Clayton at right. Pianist Harry Donnelly and drummer Jack Roth stayed with Jimmy for years

