Belle Barth

“My next story is a little risque.”

photo: Barbara deLisser
Prior to June 9, 1960, Belle Barth was known only to those people in Miami Beach, Chicago, or in the Catskill Mountain resort area in New York, who pride themselves on being “in the know.”

This avant garde of popular entertainment packed the nightclubs where she appeared and brought their friends to watch them get as hysterical as they did the first time that they had heard Belle Barth.

Belle had never had a press agent and yet in these areas was one of the top nightclub attractions. One person told another. Each one liked to feel that they were one of the select few who had discovered Belle.

Belle’s best shows were considered to be in the early hours of the morning. Most of the people who go to Nightclubs in these hours are your show business and top celebrities. These composed the Belle Barth fan clubs prior to that fateful day in June.

That day the first Belle Barth album, “If I embarrass you, tell your friends,” was issued despite certain technical difficulties. The three recording crews sent to tape her shows collapsed with laughter, and were unable to properly control the tape.

This problem was solved by getting a Cuban recording engineer who didn’t understand English to monitor the session, seating him in such a way that he wouldn’t be convinced by Belle’s facial expressions.

The next problem arose in the recording studios when the tape was edited. The tape took a record number of hours to process as the crews played it over and over for their own edification, and stopped all work in the adjoining buildings by calling everyone in to hear them.

Many of them devoted their time to making copies of these tapes for their friends and neighbors. The first album had a record circulation before it was even issued.

This was solved by hiring private detectives to watch the tape on a 24-hour basis. A similar problem was had in marketing. The salesmen were unable to make more than one or two calls a day as the buyer would insist on calling everybody he knew to listen to the sample.

Finally, the record stores found that their clerks were spending most of their time doing imitations of Belle Barth, retelling her stories. There was no solution to this, but the best step, the record stores were told, was to just leave the covers out and put the actual records under lock and key, and not even allow the salesmen to hear them.

It is doubtful if people were embarrassed, but they certainly did tell their friends.

In the worst doldrums since Thomas Edison invented the phonograph, the word in the record trade was that nothing was selling but Belle Barth.

Suddenly, it seemed as if the entire adult population in America had discovered her. Where previously she had been only news to the nightclub columnists mainly in Miami, her doings were now front-page stories throughout the country.

Where previously her arguments with nightclub owners were repeated only to their wives, these were now seized upon by the Broadway columnists as items which pushed Liz and Eddie out of their columns.

She appeared at the Cloisters in Los Angeles and did more business than any of the top jazz, popular recording stars and comedians had ever done.

She played the Roundtable in New York. Entire families were split over the question, “Was this the ‘real’ Belle Barth or the ‘edited’ Belle Barth?”

Belle was doing so much business around the country that agents were telling their clients, “Drop rock-n-roll and try to talk like Belle.”

The amount of the sales of Belle’s first album was so exaggerated that columnists printed they were in the millions.

But it did seem as though no “hip” American with a long-playing machine, which could be protected from children, would be without his Belle Barth album.

Other record companies frantically searched throughout the world for anyone who could come close to Belle Barth. Women even liked Belle Barth were dragged into recording studios and were told to talk.

Las Vegas nightclub owners outbid each other, offering her more money than Sinatra had gotten if she would come there. One said that they would give her a whole bank of her own slot machines rigged to pay off 200% on the dollar in her own dressing room.

Others who researched her knew of her fondness for cooking and flowers, and said they would build her a special kitchen and transplant her roses from her home in Miami to outside her stage door.

Previously Belle played the piano and said, “I’m no Van Cliburn.” Now Van Cliburn is reported as saying when he got up to talk, “I’m no Belle Barth.”

Her problems with the second record, “My next story is a little risque,” were even more severe than with, “If I embarrass you.”

First the engineers would start laughing at the mere mention of a new Belle Barth album.

Nightclub proprietors refused to even think of the idea of having this one taped on their premises because their old patrons who weren’t invited would never forgive them.

The producer solved the problem by renting a restaurant for the evening. All precautions were taken. The doors were locked so that no one could leave ahead of time to try to beat everyone else out with the newest Belle Barth story.

Even people in the audience mentioned casually in the first album became world-wide celebrities. Phil Greenwald, talent director of the Concord Hotel, to whom Belle addressed an aside for fan mail from all over the world.

The fame that has come to Belle Barth at this late date has been attested to in many ways.

The Miami Beach bus tours now include the club “where Belle Barth appeared” when she is not in town as one of their attractions.

Fame has had its penalties for Belle. She is literally a home body. Now she is treated everywhere she goes as a celebrity.

Where before people just asked her to tell some of her stories, now they say, “Belle, why don’t you play Shakespeare . . .” . . . “Belle, we’ve got a swell part in the movie for you.”

Executives of the top talent agencies instructed their key men, “Sign Belle Barth.”

She received offers from twelve foreign countries, nine of them which have languages she doesn’t even speak or understand.

Ambitious tycoons instructed their press agents to make sure that Belle Barth mentions them in their act.

Now that she is of the world-wide renown, Belle looks back to the days when every new person coming into the club could “discover” her.

Liner notes by Eddie Jaffe
...a word about

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