

Quick, Timely Reads

*Reading in the Time of Coronavirus
On the Waterfront*

West Fourth Street Music Scene

*Let's Be Friends, Sunbeam Bread,
and the Ave Maria*

By David Frew
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Dr. David Frew, a prolific writer, author, and speaker, grew up on Erie's lower west side as a proud "Bay Rat," joining neighborhood kids playing and marauding along the west bayfront. He has written for years about his beloved Presque Isle and his adventures on the Great Lakes. In a new series of articles for the Jefferson, the retired professor takes note of life in and around the water.

"Let's be friends the Sunbeam way.
Reach for Sunbeam bread today.
Here's little Miss Sunbeam smiling at you.
She'll be friends with each of you."

Television was in its infancy during the 1950s and sets were rare. But thanks to my father being an electronics salesman, we had one of the first TVs in the neighborhood. It was a black and white (of course), table-top, Hallicrafter, which was about 24 inches long with a screen that was no more than 12 inches in diameter. We only received a single channel, WICU, and weekday broadcasting did not begin until suppertime.

I did not particularly like the television. I preferred radio, especially since I had my own crystal tuner with an antenna hooked to my metal bed springs as well as an auxiliary wire leading out the bedroom window to a metal pole behind the house. Most evenings I could get mega-station broadcasts from Pittsburgh, Nashville, Cincinnati, Toronto, and Chicago.



The VHF Hallicrafter TV set

There was, however, one television program that I looked forward to, – a Sunday evening, locally produced variety show titled “Let’s Be Friends.” The show’s MC, Paul Dwyer, sang and danced as he introduced local talent. More important for me was the show’s regular house band, the Tune Toppers. The Tune Toppers consisted of four (sometimes five) local musicians and included band leader, Jimmy Manucci, Jimmy Iesue, and Jimmy Modica, who was my next-door neighbor. In addition to the show’s theme song, “Little Miss Sunbeam,” they played a variety of 1940s and 1950s music, mostly featuring semi-big band and popular music. The instrumental ensemble included an accordion, a saxophone, horns, and drums and was the opening and closing act for Dwyer. Dwyer moved to Erie from Buffalo when his father took over Erie’s Firch Baking Company, where Sunbeam Bread was produced, and he also worked there.

Let's Be Friends

Tri-State Area's No. 1 Live TV Show

TONIGHT AT 7:30

WICU

Special Christmas Show

Presented by
**Little
Miss
Sunbeam**

Your Host

★ PAUL DWYER

7-Year Old Songstress

★ JUDY ZALEWSKI

10-Year Old Ventriquist

★ JUDY YOCULAN

Basketball Star

University of Dayton

★ CARMEN RIAZZI

(Formerly of Tech)

Football Star

University of Notre Dame

★ JIM SCHAAP

(Formerly of Prep)

Academy High Concert

Pianist

★ DAN KELLY

Pittsburgh Opera Singer

★ TOM LEWIS

Music by

★ TUNE TOPPERS



Merry Christmas

from Little Miss Sunbeam
and all the Folks at the Firch Baking Co.

May your every Christmas wish come true and your heart be filled with Friendship throughout the bright New Year.



oldtimeerie.blogspot.com

Dwyer's image will always be imprinted in my memory for cheery vocal renditions of the sponsor's theme song, the "Sunbeam Bread jingle." The iconic bread girl was endemic in my neighborhood, which was populated by several small grocery stores. There would almost always be a Sunbeam Bread truck parked somewhere on the block while its driver made deliveries to a store. Each bread truck was adorned by an image of Little Miss Sunbeam, who was so popular that neighborhood girls emulated her hair style and fashion. There was an annual Little Miss Sunbeam look-alike-contest sponsored by the "Let's Be Friends" television show. Finalists were featured on the show and the Little Miss Sunbeam look among neighborhood girls increased in popularity during the runup to the contest. Little girls came to school with their hair looking almost exactly like the bread truck image and wearing a blue ribbon.



Little Miss Sunbeam

The show's primary attraction for me was Jimmy Modica. His family lived right next door, and I would hear him practicing his saxophone. He played for hours each day and his musical tastes ran the spectrum from classical to big band and pop songs. He regularly played some of my favorites like "Tennessee Waltz" and "Glow Worm," often drifting into the solo riffs that were so popular among sax players of the era. But my favorite, which he played almost every time that he practiced, was the "Ave Maria," a song that I associated with church and its massive pipe organ, not with a modern saxophone.

During the summer, Modica often practiced outside in his backyard, and I would wander out to listen on many occasions. It seemed strange that he played the "Ave Maria" so often until I learned that at his 1945 Strong Vincent High School graduation he stepped onto the commencement stage, dedicated his performance to his mother, Celia Modica, and played a stirring solo saxophone rendition of the popular hymn. I'm told that there wasn't a dry eye in the house.

For a youngster living on West Fourth Street it was amazing to live next door to a television star. And a generous one at that. When I was nine years old, my father brought a guitar home and gave it to me. I later learned that he purchased it from a friend at a bar for \$10, which in the pre-inflation days of the 1950s was quite a lot of money. It was way too big for me and hard to play. The strings were so far above the guitar neck that it took a herculean effort to depress, and most of the notes that I played were infected by unwanted vibrations. But I took a few lessons at Osiecki's Music Store and learned to play several songs. My favorite, because it was relatively easy to play, was "Going Home," a slow, melodic hymn that had been featured at FDR's funeral. The song was adapted from a famous classical composition, Antonin Dvorak's Ninth Symphony. After I had struggled to learn it for weeks and mastered a sterile, single-note rendition, more intended to teach new guitar students to read music than to become a virtuoso, my father dragged me out to the backyard one day to see Modica. Jimmy was playing his sax next door and welcomed us over. I was embarrassed and intimidated. Modica took the guitar, looked it over, tuned it properly and played a few major chords (even though he was a saxophone player). At the time, major chords were well beyond my understanding.

Modica asked me to play something, and in a clumsy way I began with the opening notes to “Going Home” while he listened patiently. Then as I played, he picked up his saxophone and began to fill the empty spaces between my clumsy, single notes with amazing horn sounds. We (or rather he) played the entire song and when we were done, he encouraged me to keep practicing. I continued to watch “Let Be Friends” faithfully every Sunday, and especially my musical hero, Jimmy Modica.

Modernity and technology eventually conspired to change local television. In 1954, a new station, WSEE-35, arrived to provide competition for WICU-12. The new station was a UHF (ultra-high frequency) as opposed to VHF (very high frequency) broadcaster, and for a few years Channel 12 continued to enjoy an advantage since early television sets were VHF-only and could not receive Channel 35. The “fix” for that problem was buying a “converter,” which had to be wired to the VHF television. To receive a UHF station, the converter had to be turned on and tuned (with difficulty) and still the Channel 35 signal was inferior.

This transition led to neighborhood people cobbling together every imaginable kind of antenna rig, from inside rabbit ears to complicated outdoor rigs. The antennas needed to receive a good UHF picture signal helped launch a neighborhood technology race, with TV aficionados climbing roofs and using backyard, stand-alone poles to mount bigger, better, and higher antennas. For years, there were miles of antenna wire running, through the neighborhood and into crude holes drilled through window frames. Eventually, the antenna race inadvertently led to an amazing discovery. On clear days along Erie’s bayfront, people were able to receive several Canadian stations from such mysterious cities as London, Hamilton, Kitchener, and Toronto. Ontario broadcasters sent signals that bounced across the open lake to lower westside neighborhoods. With all the programming competition, “Let’s be Friend’s” eventually lost its audience. Eventually, most television rooms featured a literal rat’s nest of wires connecting TV sets, converters, and antennas.



UHF converters, rabbit ears, and other antennas soon led to a complicated rat’s nest of wires that made television watching more than daunting. It was necessary to tune in the television and the converter and then to position antennas before a program could be watched.

The Tune Toppers played on, doing dances, clubs, and other venues

but they eventually faded away, probably because of modern rock and roll (there were no electric guitars in the group). Eventually, band leader Manucci, and saxophonist Modica slipped into obscurity, but Jimmy Iesue did not. The Tune Topper's accordion (and piano) player continued for decades after creating his own group called the "Jimmy Iesue Combo." His group featured a variety of local musicians over the years, sometimes including Manucci. Iesue enjoyed renewed popularity during the 1960s as a result of media attention to Lawrence Welk, who featured accordion music on his popular television show. The Jimmy Iesue Combo played a Gannon Christmas party in 2000, and I was amazed by their skill – three old guys playing soft dance music and hitting all the notes.



Jimmy Iesue with his accordion

During the winter of 1985, my wife Mary Ann and I were making one of our regular trips to the Cedar Lee Theater in Cleveland where we went to watch Inde-films and other noncommercial movies. We usually stayed overnight so that we could see several. It was our way of creating a film festival. On that trip, we watched a small-budget film called "Local Hero." The movie was exceptional but I was most taken by the soundtrack, which featured haunting guitar sounds that perfectly complemented the on-screen narrative. As the film continued, it began to seem that the story was secondary to the music. The final musical piece began mysteriously and then drifted into my long-time favorite, "Going Home." Rather than being a single-note rendition, the film score drifted back into the song's classical music roots and then burst into a virtuoso performance, featuring major and minor chords as counterpoint, complex double-noted guitar sounds with Celtic style ornaments, and an obvious virtuoso performance. It was so far removed from the simple guitar sheet music that I recalled from my youth that it was several minutes before I was sure I was hearing "Going Home." When the screen film credits rolled, I wrote down the name of the film's soundtrack artist, Mark Knopfler, and resolved to learn more.



The soundtrack, which was released as a CD, marked the beginning of my appreciation for Knopfler and his British rock group, Dire Straits. I listened to the group and enjoyed the music but wondered if the simple, hard-driving melodies of such songs as “Sultans of Swing” were enough to contain the creativity and artistry of the musician who had created the soundtrack for “Local Hero.” Dire Straits seemed more rooted in American country music or rock and roll than the complex melodies and arrangements in the “Local Hero” soundtrack.

Apparently, Knopfler had been feeling a need to branch out in 1983 when he took a break from Dire Straits to work on several solo projects. In addition to the score for “Local Hero,” he showed his diversity and Scottish roots by writing the score for the film “Cal.” Knopfler returned to the band in 1985 and continued with them for several years but later left again to pursue solo projects.



Mark Knopfler with his vintage Gibson Les Paul guitar

Last year, I watched a live-streaming concert from Royal Albert Hall in London. I was drawn to the event by curiosity as well as admiration for Knopfler’s musical ability. He took the stage at age 71 and played a variety of songs, backed up by a talented group of musicians. It was not surprising that he chose “Going Home” for the concert finale. As in his soundtrack rendition, Knopfler began the song’s prelude by drifting back into to the classical symphony written by Czech composer Antonin

Dvorak. The 1893 composition, "Symphony 9: Music from the New World," was a celebration of the composer's time in the United States and is said to be an amalgamation of Native American, United States folk, and Czech Republic influences. The song was popularized by William Arms Fisher, who added lyrics in 1922.

Knopfler's prelude reached well beyond the popular versions of the song that became famous after FDR's funeral and into the prelude written by Dvorak 137 years ago. And for the first time, for me, the music was accompanied by visual images of Knopfler finger-picking notes as opposed to sounds from my DVD. Knopfler's 2019 performance exudes virtuosity. With his vintage Gibson Les Paul guitar, Knopfler demonstrates the difference between playing and inhabiting music. The Royal Albert Hall "Going Home" performance begins on a darkened stage with sounds of a distant penny whistle. Then Knopfler, who begins as a shadow at center stage, is illuminated as he begins the prelude. A minute later, just as he reaches the familiar "Going Home" melody, a saxophonist steps into center stage and adds counterpoint to the haunting sounds, emanating from Knopfler's guitar. Some how the saxophone instantaneously transported me back to West Fourth Street, the 1950s, and the Modica family. I miss them all. Celia and her three children: Jimmy, Johnny, and Gerry.



The sounds of Mark Knopfler's saxophone player reminded me of Jimmy Modica and the Tune Toppers from Erie's early days of television.

Several years ago, I was with several grandkids in front of a television when one of them posed a question. "What were your favorite shows when you were our age, Grampa?" When I responded that "we did not have a television at first and that when we finally got one there was only one channel. For emphasis I described the "Kukla, Fran and Ollie" show. They thought I was spinning a typical preposterous Grandpa Campfire story about the good old days. One channel? Unbelievable.

Note: Mark Knopfler's 2019 Royal Albert Hall performance of "Going Home" is currently available on You Tube; a powerful experience!

Photos:

Special Christmas show: <https://oldtimeerie.blogspot.com/2012/11/?m=0>

Little Miss Sunbeam: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/554787247817218162/>
UHF Converter: <http://historysdumpster.blogspot.com/2014/03/the-history-of-uhf-tv.html>
Rabbit Ear Antenna: <https://www.ebay.com/itm/REMBRANDT-VINTAGE-RABBIT-EARS-TV-ANTENNA-ATOMIC-1950s-RETRO-TELEVISION-SET-TOP-/183895569879>
Jimmy Leuse: <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/erietimesnews/obituary.aspx?n=james-jimmy-gennario-iesue&pid=180308337&fhid=9679>
Local Heros: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/local_hero
Mark Knopfer: <https://www.royalalberthall.com/about-the-hall/news/2013/june/27-may-1-june-2013-mark-knopfer-returns-to-the-royal-albert-hall/>
Tune Toppers: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JHdzhtaaM64&list=PLC27702C713958FCA&index=5&t=0s&app=desktop>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is an emeritus professor at Gannon University, where he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.



In Case You Missed It

[‘What’s Become of the Common Good?’](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. Andrew Roth

[Savocchio Broke One Glass Ceiling After Another](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. Judith Lynch

[Bay-Rat Rhapsody: Riding the Bus to the Y](#) written by prolific author, historian, and Jefferson presenter, Dr. David Frew.

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