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PREFACE

This is not a book about drums or drum technique. This is a book about Buddy Rich, the man. I have used many comments that Buddy made in interviews, and have been very careful to note where I found all the quotes. I have put everything in chronological order and tried to verify if he remembered correctly. He didn't always; many times he was wrong about the year, place or situation. Sometimes he didn't remember anything at all, for the simple reason that Rich never looked back—so I realized I couldn't completely rely on his versions. Thus, previously published articles and reviews became very important in my efforts to put everything in place. I have also interviewed musicians, arrangers, tour leaders, producers, authors and many others, all of whom helped me to clarify certain happenings.

My wish has been to show all of Buddy's different sides, not only the most frequently-shown image of the angry and sometimes ruthless drummer. Buddy Rich was so much more, and I hope the reader will better understand the pressures he dealt with all of his life. Wherever he appeared, the audience expected him to perform the best solo they had ever heard, and live up to the legend he had become: "the world's greatest drummer."

Buddy Rich. One of a Kind.

Pelle Berglund, Stockholm, December 15, 2017

CHAPTER 1

Fascinating Rhythm



Traps, the Drum Wonder, circa 1926.

It was March, 1919 and the husband and wife team of Robert and Bess Rich were once again out on tour. They took pride in always being on time, made meticulous preparations and demanded that new numbers were practiced carefully. Robert's old stage partner, Sam Wilson, had suddenly died only a few months previously, and Bess had taken his place in the act, so the extra preparations were especially important. They had also changed the name of their vaudeville act from Wilson and Rich to Rich and Rennard. It sounded quite French and exciting, and would be sure to tempt a curious American or two—or so Robert, often the one who decided the direction they would take, reasoned.

He wanted to develop the act even further, but that was easier said than done. There was something missing. They could definitely deliver a good quality show, but he was on constant lookout for that unique number that would make audiences flock to listen to them. Then something happened which would change their life forever.

They had arrived early in the morning at the Bijou Theater in Fort Wayne, Indiana, for a week's booking. The instruments had been delivered, and Robert was passing out the sheet music for a new number, written by him and his wife, to the musicians so everyone could rehearse. Everything was set up by 8:30 in the morning and the costumes were laid out. Their son, Bernard, called "Pal," barely 18 months old, was sitting in front of the stage watching, fascinated by all that was happening. The orchestra began to rehearse, but the drummer kept stopping and waving at Robert. Robert tried to ignore the drummer's attempts to get his attention, because the orchestra wasn't yet sounding good on the new chart, but to no avail; the drummer clearly wanted to tell him something. Growing impatient, Robert stopped the orchestra. The drummer immediately jumped down from the stage and gave little pal his drumsticks. "Play it again. Robert, look at your son!" he exclaimed. Everyone stared in amazement at Pal.

As the band began playing again, everyone could see that the boy followed the rhythm exactly. They all laughed in amazement. Intrigued, they stopped the music and changed the beat. It didn't matter whether they played in 4/4 or 3/4 time, the boy played with them easily. The musicians stood flabbergasted by the way little Pal could follow the

orchestra's different rhythms. Immediately, ideas came to Robert's mind. Could he use Pal's talents in some way? Had they finally found something that would make them stand out from the other competing acts? He had his doubts; their son was so unbelievably young, and he couldn't put his boy through something that could possibly damage him for the rest of his life. Playing with the orchestra was one thing. Doing it in front of an audience was something entirely different.

Despite his hesitation, Robert let himself be persuaded by the band members and the producer that evening; Little Pal was allowed to be part of Rich & Rennard. The show would be a trial. They spent the rest of the day preparing as best they could. A snare drum and a bass drum were borrowed from a local music store and the band was given a short, new piece to play. It wasn't a random choice; patriotism was rampant after the end of World War I, and colorful parades and displays of nationalism were common. To exploit these feelings, Robert chose the patriotic song "The Stars and Stripes Forever," and dressed Pal in a white sailor suit. Everything was now ready for the show.

Robert and Bess Rich stood in the wings and hoped for the best.

Robert Rich was born December 2, 1886, in Albany, New York, to Jewish parents. His father was Russian and his mother came from Austria. Even in his early years, Robert knew that he wanted to be on stage, and when he was about 16 years of age, he made good on his wish to perform in public. At that time, he was working with a man named Reilly, and together they performed in clubs and small shows near Albany. Calling themselves Rich & Reilly, they made \$5 an evening. Robert's part was mostly dancing. After completing their schooling at Albany Business College, the duo broke up and Robert went to New York alone, getting a job as a bookkeeper at a cardboard business. But he soon desired to return to the stage. He became a member of the famous Dockstader Minstrels, which was a recognized institution in New York with known names like Al Jolson, but he soon found himself feeling closed in and invisible in such a large organization. After a while he quit to join a smaller theater company. But even there his membership was short.

Instead, he started an act and learned to entertain an audience on his own. It was hard work and required meticulous preparation.

At the end of his teenage years, Robert performed with Sam Wilson, who had also belonged to Dockstader, and also left. This is how the duo Wilson & Rich was formed, and they quickly became quite popular. They each had their own distinct roles: Sam was the more organized and tidy person both on and off stage. He was also a decent singer. But the one who was most prominent and appreciated on stage was Robert, who had developed excellent comic timing, and he never failed to charm the audiences with his phenomenal, fancy footwork-focused step dancing and humor. Robert told author John Minahan: “Blackface, comedy, singing—in those years you had to do everything. If you got a job in a show and they wanted you to do a part, if they needed a Mick, they said, ‘Can you do Irish?’ And you’d say, ‘Well, I can try it now, I’ll tell ya that now, me lad, I’ll be there if ya need me.’ If they wanted a Dutch act, you could do it. Whatever they wanted, you had to do. I was a funny man; used to get a lot of laughs, too.”¹

At the beginning of 1906, Robert had met an attractive young lady named Bess Skolnik at a party at his cousin’s house in Brooklyn, New York. She was only 17 years old at the time. They quickly fell in love and a year later they were married. A year later, Bess became a permanent part of the show when Sam Wilson died unexpectedly. With her clear, beautiful singing voice, she gave the performance a wider scope than before. They had two children in short order: daughters Marjorie (who was called Marge) and Josephine (called Jo). Robert loved both his daughters dearly, but he really wanted a son who he could somehow fit into the show. His wife Bess and daughter Jo were part of the act, but Marjorie had to stay home with Bess’s parents. They continued to tour, and soon Bess was again pregnant. Robert’s hope of a son was reawakened.

After a few months, Robert decided that it was time for the family to return home and live a more normal existence. They had long been looking for something that would give their careers a lift, but since nothing had happened, he believed that they couldn’t carry on with their life of traveling and performing. By taking a regular job, Robert hoped their financial situation would become more stable. He just had to face

facts, and after applying for a number of jobs, he became employed as a shipping clerk at the Wander Chemical Company.

On September 30, 1917, their third child was born in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn. This time Robert got his longed-for son, who was christened Bernard Rich and given the nickname Pal. It didn't take very long before they realized that their son was very special. He was hyperactive. He crawled, talked and walked early. And he was strong. Soon Robert discovered that his son also had rhythm in his blood. On one occasion during their numerous tours, the whole company went out for dinner. As they passed a music store, Pal stopped in his tracks. He pointed at the window and cried, "Me drum! Me drum!" He wasn't even 18 months old. It was the same when they went into a restaurant. If there wasn't any music, their son was inconsolable, but if there was music, he always picked up his knife and fork and played along.

"One time we went to the American Hall, which was the pride of the Loews circuit," said Robert. "We went to see a show, and there was a band appearing there. Pal was, oh, about 15, 16 months old, and we went in to see the band. We had two seats and he'd sit up on the arm of one seat and listen. We're sitting there watching the show, and the guy hits a blue note. Pal jumps out of that seat and he says: 'Oh, bad moggage! Bad moggage!' I could hardly believe it."² Time passed, and Robert continued his rather monotonous work as a clerk at the Wander Chemical Company. He wasn't happy there, and soon he found himself at a crossroads. He decided to start another show in the treacherous world of vaudeville, once again with his wife Bess.

It's not clear where the word "vaudeville" originated. Many believe that the theater form started somewhere in France in the 18th century, emanating from the word "vau de ville," said to be a name first given to songs written by Olivier Basselin, a 15th-century composer born in the town of Vau de Vire in Normandy. While this is possible, no one knows for sure. It could be that the word simply looked exciting in a program; it sounded French, and anything that came from France had to be classy. A typical vaudeville evening was often made up of a series of acts containing elements of either satire or parody, all independent of each other. There could be comedy skits, song and dance numbers, animal