
the man who danced with fred astaire
hermes pan
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The Man Who Danced with Fred Astaire

JOHN FRANCESCHINA

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For Michelene Laski

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CONTENTS

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FOREWORD

When John told me he was preparing a biography of my uncle Hermes, I was surprised and happy—and worried how he might convey Hermes's personality. I'm sure Tio, as we called him, would have been edgy at the prospect; he could be uneasy when he was the center of attention.

Hermes Pan would *love* this book!

For my part, I enjoyed talking to John and sharing the humanizing family details that are frequently missing from the biographies I've read. Tio's sense of humor and his affectionate involvement in our family are not usually evident in the many articles about his dancing career. John, on the other hand, has captured the gentle, kind, and quirky side of the man who to me, my brother, and my two sisters was like a bonus father. I am so grateful.

Michelene Laski

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Hermes Pan

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Introduction

When you're involved in something that later becomes great,
you never realize it at the time. You just hope it's good.
—Hermes Pan to Maureen C. Solomon, 1983

It would satisfy Hermes Pan, who had a unique sense of humor, to begin with a chicken joke, or at least an amusing story. One of his favorites was about the time he joined Cole Porter on a Friday evening for dinner at Henri Soulé's Le Pavillon, fashionably regarded as the finest French restaurant in New York City. Nervously awaiting the arrival of the famous Broadway composer, Hermes spent a good part of an hour drinking martinis—four of them in all—so by the time he and Cole were seated, at a premium table in a dim alcove just off the main dining room, Pan was feeling no pain. Porter was an ebullient host and a felicitous raconteur whose witty topics of conversation were matched by his elegantly prearranged menu selection: caviar, Caesar salad, and a chicken perfectly prepared in a delicate golden sauce. A dinner fit for a king—but not Hermes Pan whose religious beliefs taught him not to eat meat on Fridays. Not wanting to appear dissatisfied with Porter's choice of entrée and order something else, Hermes decided that his best option was to pretend to eat the chicken—the four martinis had done their best to prevent any other solution from entering his mind. Misdirecting Porter through lively conversation, Pan proceeded to take the chicken, a bite at a time, and drop it into the napkin on his lap, interjecting a vegetable into his mouth between the discarded bites—all the time watching Porter's gaze so that the ruse could be completed outside of the composer's line of vision. Hermes had managed to dispose of all the chicken on his plate by the time champagne, dessert, coffee, and brandy were served, and the ruse would have passed unnoticed if not for the busboy clearing the table who grabbed Pan's napkin and let fly the hidden chicken all over the restaurant's rich red carpet—in view of Porter and everyone else seated in the vicinity. Cole said nothing to Pan about the incident, but when he was at dinner with Fred Astaire, a few months later, Porter told him about it, concluding, "Pan's very nice, but you know he's a little *scary*."

Called the "doyen of Hollywood dance directors,"[1] having the longest career of any choreographer in musical films, the "quiet giant of film dance" who, with Fred Astaire, "created not just a series of film musicals, but a series of icons that permanently etched in the public's mind for generations what film dancing and, indeed, Broadway dancing were supposed to look like,"[2] Hermes Pan is a legendary figure

to fans and students of the Hollywood musical, yet all but unknown to the general public. If his career had been limited to the Fred Astaire–Ginger Rogers musicals he choreographed at RKO, his work would be worthy of a full-length study, but given the fact that he went on to choreograph at Twentieth Century-Fox, M-G-M, Paramount, and later for television, winning both the Oscar and the Emmy for best choreography, a book-length study of Pan's eighty-nine films is a necessary addition to the annals of film dance. As dance historian Jerome Delamater wrote in 1979, "Hermes Pan has one of the most extensive careers—extending from 1933 to the present—of any Hollywood dance director,"[3] and yet, except for a handful of articles and interviews published in dance magazines—and most of those keeping him in the shadow of Fred Astaire—he remains an obscure figure.[4] Although Pan did not lead a controversial life—critic John Kobal once described him as "self-effacing to the point of almost vanishing"[5]—writing about Hermes Pan is tracing the history of the Hollywood musical from its golden age. It is a study of the collaboration between a "benevolent perfectionist" who cared as much about the human being as he did about the dancing, and the stars, composers, and directors with whom he worked.

In the early 1980s, David Patrick Columbia and Kenyon Kramer convinced Pan to collaborate with them on an autobiography entitled "Dancin' in the Movies: A Hollywood Life," of which an outline and two sample chapters were completed as of 12 October 1983. No publisher was interested in optioning the prospectus. As a choreographer, Pan was considered old news, and his life deemed too ordinary to be of much interest to readers. Some years later, David Patrick Columbia attempted to stimulate interest in another Pan biography, *The Man Who Danced with Fred Astaire*, and he met with the same disinterest. The response to documenting Pan's life was hardly surprising. Even his niece, Michelene Laski, responded quizzically when I approached her about the present biography. "There's nothing to write about," she insisted. Pan was universally revered as the kindest man in the world. There were no scandals, no hidden agendas, or closeted skeletons. "He led a normal life."

Normalcy is certainly relative particularly when it is applied to the choreographer of eighty-nine films and Fred Astaire's most frequent collaborator. In many ways, Pan lived the American Dream. Armed with only an eighth-grade education, an inexhaustible imagination, and a talent for dancing, Pan rose from the ranks of the Depression's poor to the most prolific and arguably the most successful of Hollywood's film choreographers, supporting his sister and widowed mother along the way, befriended by stars and starlets, princesses, and world and religious leaders. Living comfortably in Beverly Hills, Rome, and Tehran, where he was a frequent guest of the shah of Iran at the Golestan Palace, he spent his retirement in good health and celebrated for his achievements, a beloved and admired figure until his death. To what already appears to be too perfect an existence, Pan added a lifetime friendship and collaboration with Fred Astaire, the greatest dancer of his generation; deeply committed religious beliefs; a genuine concern

for everyone he met; an unbounded generosity toward his family and friends; and the humbleness and selflessness of a monk—all of which is supported by factual evidence.

A closer examination of what appears to be a rags-to-riches fairy tale, however, reveals a great many apparent contradictions in Pan's life. Even though he was prolific, he was not a workaholic—far from it. In the words of David Patrick Columbia, "Pan simply fell into choreographing. If he could do what he wanted, he'd stay at home, drink wine, smoke cigarettes, and dance. He wasn't ambitious."[6] And, even though he achieved great fame as a choreographer, he never thought of choreography as his life's work. It was his "day job," an activity he enjoyed but not what he felt defined him. Unlike other major Hollywood choreographers, Jack Cole, Bob Fosse, or Michael Kidd, for example, Pan claimed not to have a characteristic style to his work, preferring to allow the period of the film and the dramatic situation to dictate the style of his choreography. Pan believed that dance was the elevation of real life into fantasy and worked to make his dances fun to perform. Jerry Jackson, Pan's friend and assistant, noted that Pan's genius lay in finding the essence and mood of a number. "Hermes was less interested in steps than the style and theatricality of the movement. He might take suggestions from his dancers or assistants, but he always had a concept of the style and dramatic necessity of the movement."[7] Popular dance forms, special effects, and an ever-present sense of humor were hallmarks of Pan's choreography, all designed to serve the needs of the film rather than create any kind of brand. In many ways, Hermes resembled more the anonymous artisan or monk from the Middle Ages who viewed himself as a conduit of God's inspiration. Devoutly religious, Pan believed that his remarkable abilities were God-given and that he was the vessel through which his talent found fruition in the dancer's movements. Without ambition or inflated ego, Hermes never pushed himself out to be noticed. He honestly believed that his place was in the shadow of the performers.

Similarly, Hermes appeared satisfied to live in the shadows in his personal life. As Jerry Jackson observed, "He led a very private life,"[8] one that was anomalous to his being among the A-list Hollywood personalities always in demand at parties and opening nights. Hermes was grateful to have been accepted into Hollywood society though he was not entirely comfortable in it. He liked people but hated pretense and gossip—the stuff of which he believed Tinseltown was created. Still, he was a devoted friend to many great stars—Ann Miller, Ginger Rogers, Lana Turner, Rita Hayworth, Richard Burton, Elizabeth Taylor, Tyrone Power, Linda Darnell, Katharine Hepburn, to name a few. Pan was an expert listener and confidant but rarely shared the details of his private life even with his closest friends, and in public interviews he was happy to reveal the details of his youth, discuss his work with Fred Astaire, and offer advice to young hopefuls, but he never steered the discussion toward his personal life. As David Patrick Columbia suggested, "Hermes never felt like a big deal." He truly did not believe his life was a subject worth discussing.

It was well known in the film community that Hermes Pan was homosexual but nothing was ever spoken about it in public.[9] There is no record of when he actually realized his preference, but his experience as a chorus boy in Broadway musicals certainly provided him the opportunity to interact with like-minded young men. In Hollywood, Pan's accumulation of gay friends became a problem because, as he told David Patrick Columbia, his mother did not like seeing him entirely in the company of men. It made her uncomfortable—obviously because she sensed the sexual preference of her son. Because Pan adored his mother and always sought to please her, her discomfort caused him to become secretive about his associations—so much so that even some of his associates were unaware of his sexual preferences. Jerry Jackson, for example, told me that "everyone thought he was asexual. I never thought of Hermes in a sexual way with anyone," and even William J. Mann, in *Behind the Screen: How Gays and Lesbians Shaped Hollywood 1910–1969*, cites Pan as a heterosexual dance director (Mann 2001, 278).[10]

As a devout Roman Catholic, Pan was concerned with his sexual preferences since Church doctrine determined that homosexual acts were contrary to the natural law of procreation and therefore sinful. Homosexual desires or attractions, on the other hand, were deemed not sinful in themselves but "disordered" temptations to sin. Pan sought to keep his urges under control even though the contradictions that marked his professional and personal lives were again in evidence. The dilemma of being a good Catholic and homosexual was further confused for Pan when, during one of his trips to New York City, he was contacted by Francis Joseph, Cardinal Spellman, the archbishop of New York inviting him to an all-male party. Whether or not Pan had been aware of Spellman's reputed voracious homosexuality (his affair with a chorus boy from *One Touch of Venus* was well known in Broadway circles),[11] he was surprised and flattered to be included in Spellman's private clique but astounded at what seemed to him to be a flagrantly public display. The incident in no way corrupted Pan's religious fervor, but it did encourage him to be even more perspicacious in his private life. Pan's passion for men and religion found its greatest expression in Italy, which from the 1950s to the end of his life provided him a second home. Rumors of Pan's Italian protégés were rife among studio dancers, but Jerry Jackson, who was with Hermes in Rome, said that there was no public manifestation of this. Even in Italy Pan was circumspect in his behavior. Indeed, as David Patrick Columbia suggests, "Pan's sexuality was a burden for him."[12]

Because he was a famous Hollywood choreographer, Pan could not live his life entirely in the shadows, but whenever he made a public appearance it was always in the company of a famous friend or woman with whom he might spend the evening dancing. Ironically, the person perhaps most responsible for keeping Hermes out of the shadows was Fred Astaire, the dancer in whose shadow Pan spent much of his career. While Hermes modestly counted himself

among Astaire's best friends, a group that included Randolph Scott, Bill Self, Jock Whitney, and David Niven (Giles 1988, 149), David Patrick Columbia suggests that Hermes was Astaire's closest friend. "They were soul mates, both with the same sort of odd and childlike sense of humor. Fred always told people that others were his best friends, but Hermes was truly closest to him. Pan felt that he and Astaire had a karmic relationship." For Pan the relationship began in the late 1920s, long before he even met Astaire, when dancers used to comment on their resemblance. During the Broadway run of *Happy* (in which Pan danced in the chorus with his sister, Vasso "Ditty" Pan), Hermes walked over to the Alvin Theatre where Astaire was appearing with his sister Adele in *Funny Face* and took his first look at the great dancer, twenty-nine and balding. The eighteen-year-old Pan was not impressed—a view that was reversed five years later when the two met at RKO studios in Hollywood where Hermes found an artistic soul mate with whom he would develop a symbiotic relationship for the rest of his life. Others would stimulate Pan's other passions, but Astaire helped fuel the fire that burned brightest in Pan's personality—the urge to communicate through dance.

Because he had little ambition or any kind of a master plan, Pan's life appears in retrospect to be a rambling narrative of (often) unrelated activities guided more by luck (or as Pan would suggest, the hand of God) than any kind of self-determination. The first twenty years of his working life were spent supporting his family. That he managed to do it principally through a job he loved was a happy accident. The next thirty years were spent philosophizing and exploring what Pan felt he should be doing with his life. No longer taxed with the simple necessity of earning money, Hermes finally allowed himself to ask, "What do I *really* want to do?" The last twenty years depict Pan as a world traveler, the darling of princes and the elite, and a beloved celebrity, duly honored for his achievements. The journey meanders through family celebrations and religious observances (Hermes was not happy when Astaire wanted to rehearse on Christmas or Easter), Pan's famous pasta dinners, and elaborate Hollywood parties—though always with the underlying need for privacy, or, perhaps better said, a retreat from the public world in which Hermes Pan fell into fame. Like a monk, Hermes needed a retreat where he could experience a spiritual life independent of his work.

Hermes did not dwell on the contradictions or complexities of his day-to-day existence. Instead, he met the ironies of life with a great wide grin. As David Patrick Columbia remarked, "Pan was very serious about life, but handled his life in a way that wasn't serious. He was light hearted, and sunny, and positive. Hermes had a big wide laugh. His head would fall back with a guffaw, tears of joy often streaming down his face." Jerry Jackson recalled working on a Carol Channing special with Pan in the 1960s. They were completing rehearsal for the "Jimmy Dean" number at the CBS studios, when choreographer Michael Kidd entered to work with another star. On his way out, Hermes asked, "Who is that?"

Jerry answered, “Michael Kidd.” Hermes nodded in quiet recognition. Jackson ran back to the studio to retrieve a bag that had been left behind and Kidd stopped him to ask, “Who was that?” “Hermes Pan,” Jerry replied. Michael Kidd nodded in recognition. When Jerry told Hermes that neither of the two famous film choreographers recognized the other, Pan chortled heartily at the irony.

1

Black Bottom to Broadway

In the spring of 1956 on his way back to the United States from a trip abroad, Hermes Pan took the opportunity to visit the small town of Aigion (or Egion as it is often called) on the northern coast of the Greek Peloponnese to locate the house where his father, Pantelis Panagiotopoulos, was born.[1] Established during the Homeric epoch, replacing a Neolithic settlement, the town was named, according to legend, for the goat that fed Zeus. Accordingly, the community abounded with farms and raisin merchants in its earliest days before it was annexed by Rome, the Byzantine Empire, the Franks, the Ottoman Empire, and the Venetians. The first city to be liberated during the Greek Revolution of 1821, Aigion greeted the nineteenth century with an emergence of powerful middle-class families that prompted the development of a new way of thinking politically and economically in an attempt to create a humanistic modern city out of the over-tilled and eroded farmland. What Hermes found in 1956 was a lively village with fishing boats and sailboats crowding a single long pier that stretched out over the bluest of water. To the east he could see the Gulf of Corinth, and to the south, luxuriant forested mountains. The town proper was dotted with restaurants and shops arranged in a mosaic of miniature town squares inhabited by tourists and genial locals.

If Hermes went to Aigion in search of his ancestry, his was not a difficult task for the Panagiotopoulos (meaning "All Saints" in Greek) family was one of the two most famous, wealthy, and powerful families in the town (the Polychroniadi family was the other). His relatives, Andreas Panagiotopoulos, an early pioneer in the field of learning and minister of education, and Spyros Panagiotopoulos, a popular and innovative mayor of the city, were held in such high regard by the citizens, that, almost as soon as he had arrived, Hermes was treated as a local celebrity. With virtually no effort, he located his cousins, the theatre his ancestors had built (the first to be erected in the city), and the rustic house where his father had lived.

Pantelis Panagiotopoulos, born 1868, and his brother, Alkis (sometimes listed as Ilkis in American documents), born 1875, were trained as confectioners, one of the few nonpolitical family businesses. Alkis doted on his older brother, a habit

Pantelis Panagiotopoulos (Courtesy of the Vasso Pan Meade Collection).

that would create much melodrama in the years to come, not only because of the hero worship so typical between siblings. Pantelis was handsome, educated, and groomed for a political career, and the younger Panagiotopoulos aspired to follow in his brother's footsteps. Life for the Panagiotopoulos brothers loped along uneventfully until 1895 when the southern American state of Tennessee announced to the world its plans to celebrate one hundred years of statehood in a Tennessee Centennial and International Exposition scheduled to open the following year. Because the site of the exposition was to be the state capital, Nashville, the city decided to build a replica of the Parthenon in Athens as its contribution to the festivities. Nicknamed the "Athens of the South," because of its many educational and cultural opportunities, Nashville not only wanted to sponsor the erection of a replica of a Greek monument, but it also sought to encourage real Greeks to be in attendance at the fair. To that end, the legislature called upon Greek cities to send a representative who would bear the title, "Greek Consul to the South." In Aigion, it was quickly and unanimously decided that the eldest son of the Panagiotopoulos family should represent the city at the exposition. Pantelis was eager to make the trip across the world, hardly aware that he would never return to his home.

The first mention of Pantelis Panagiotopoulos in the United States occurs in the Nashville City Directory of 1896 in which a misspelled "Panteli Panagiotopulo"[2] is listed as living at the Commercial Hotel and working for P. Brous and Company, wholesale and retail confectioners. Why would Pantelis need to find a job when his official designation in America was "Consul of Greece, Nashville, Tennessee"? The celebration scheduled for 1896 was delayed by the presidential election and bureaucratic red tape retarding the appropriations necessary for erecting the many structures planned. The exposition would be inaugurated on 1 June 1896 but the public would not pass the gates until 1 May 1897. Certainly, Pantelis was on hand for the inaugural ceremony, which involved marching bands, military units, Confederate veterans, and the ladies from the Daughters of the American Revolution in a parade winding from downtown to the exposition grounds, and a fireworks display spelling out an invitation to "Come to the Centennial Exposition, 1897"; but then there was almost a year to wait until his official duties would begin. What's more, prestigious as the title may appear, the position was essentially an honorary one, designed to elevate the status of the Greek participants at the exposition and encourage the attendance of other Greeks living in America by offering them what appeared to be official representatives from the "old country." With the spring opening of the Tennessee Centennial and International Exposition, Pantelis moved from the Commercial Hotel to 438 North Summer, on the north side of the city across the Cumberland River, where he would reside for the next four years.

By the time the exposition closed on 31 October 1897, 1,676,000 spectators had passed through its gates having paid 50¢ for adults and 25¢ for children to witness new inventions, such as the kinetoscope and X-ray equipment, and ride the giant seesaw, seventy-five feet in the air, or the gondolas on Lake Watauga. On 11 and 12 June, President McKinley visited the event along with representatives from wire services and newspapers in Washington and major northern cities. Pantelis was in attendance at the president's reception on 12 June and stood in line to shake McKinley's hand. On 22 September, he heard Booker T. Washington speak at the Negro Pavilion, and on 8 October, Pantelis was among the large crowd that had gathered to hear William Jennings Bryan.

It is tempting to suggest that the exposure to American politicians, humanitarians, and orators at the exposition (not to mention hearing the Twenty-Second Regiment Band of New York City, conducted by Victor Herbert on a daily basis between 2 August and 8 September) is what inclined Pantelis Panagiotopoulos to remain in the United States. Certainly there was a vitality in Nashville in the late 1890s that would have been difficult to upstage in the Greek Peloponnese. But what ultimately prompted Pantelis to stay in Tennessee was the most basic of human experiences: love.

Her name was Mary Aljeanne Huston (born 14 March 1884), daughter of blacksmith and carriage-maker, Charles Henry Huston, and Edmonia Elizabeth (Betty) Phillips. Pantelis and Mary met in 1900 when she was sixteen and he was

Mary Aljeanne Huston (Courtesy of the Vasso Pan Meade Collection).

thirty-two. At the time, she was living at 411 Main Street with her parents, her seven-year-old sister, Lillian, her maternal grandmother, Mary M. Phillips, and her aunt, Mary L. Phillips. The presence of an extended family within the Huston household is an important detail both in her courtship and subsequent married life, as well as in the lives of her children.

Though not a "Virginia Belle," as contemporary sources suggest, since she was born in Davidson County, Tennessee, Mary embodied all the qualities of southern gentility, and her charms were not lost on the Greek immigrant whose Old World work ethic and cultured sophistication deeply impressed Mary's household. They were married in March 1901 in a Greek Orthodox ceremony (in a 1983 interview for *Cineaste* Hermes noted to Dan Georgakas, "We were always aware of our Greek heritage"), and a year later, on 4 March 1902, the couple's first child was born, a son named Panos. The following year, Pantelis became a U.S. citizen, and on 16 February 1906, a daughter, Vasso Maria, was added to the family. By the time Vasso was born, the Panagiotopoulos family had moved to 1717 Glenwood Place, an upscale address in Memphis, the city where Pantelis's brother Alkis had been working as a confectioner since the turn of the century. Evidently Alkis's endeavors had been profitable, because the 1900 census suggests that he was able to support an eighteen-year-old servant and nineteen-year-old clerk in

The Panagiotopoulos residence at 1717 Glenwood Place (Courtesy of the Vasso Pan Meade Collection).

his household on 349 Main Street, and Pantelis, not one to shun opportunity, saw the move as an opportunity to leave the employ of P. Brous and Company and make good on his own. Soon he would be listed in the city register as president of the Eutrophia Company, the parent company of the Eutrophia Hotel and Café at 10 South Main Street, and the Panagiotopoulos family grew accustomed to the luxury of money and servants.

On 10 December 1909, Hermes Joseph Panagiotopoulos was born at the house on Glenwood Place where day-to-day operations were handled by a staff of four African-American domestics: Mary Williams, cook; Cleveland Callaway, domestic servant; Millie Carley, house maid; and a baby nurse (unnamed in the 1910 census). Panos and Vasso, who had devised nicknames for each other (in family circles, Panos was "Bubber" and Vasso was "Ditty"), immediately christened the baby "Snooks," (unconsciously anticipating a character Fanny Brice would make famous both in vaudeville and on radio), a nickname to which Hermes would answer for the rest of his life.

In 1911 Pantelis, who had grown weary of the hotel business, moved the Panagiotopoulos family to 1511 Compton Street in Nashville to begin a new commercial venture, the Ocean Restaurant for which he was proprietor, head chef, and maitre d'. Not surprisingly, the children saw little of their father, but the business was successful enough to allow the family to take Sundays off in the spring and summer for picnics at Radnor Lake and occasional vacations at the seashore.

Cleveland Callaway, Mary Williams, Millie Carley, baby nurse (Courtesy of the Vasso Pan Meade Collection).

In the absence of a father who was busy with the family business, and a mother who, at twenty-six, was more of a free-spirited big sister than parent, Hermes was raised by an African-American nanny, affectionately called "Aunt Betty," who, unsurprisingly, made a lasting impression on the child. Pan's friend and biographer, David Patrick Columbia, recalled:

> In 1915, when Hermes Pan was six years old, the family mammy, a big black woman who was called Aunt Betty, took the boy home with her one night to her apartment in the black ghetto of Nashville known, as it was in many cities in the American South, as Black Bottom. It was there that the child was first exposed to what was called "gut-bucket" jazz and the shuffles and foot-slapping dancing of the local black Americans. His reaction was an exhilaration which he recalled seventy years later, his eyes still lighting up with joy at the memory, as nothing short of "sensual." That was Pan's first exposure to what he knew as "dance." (Columbia, May 1991, 759)

As Hermes noted in a syndicated news report in the *North Adams Transcript* (30 January 1935), "Down south there's music in the air where colored people are around. My mother says I took to dancing because my black mammy carried me

Panos and Hermes outside the Compton Street house (Courtesy of the Vasso Pan Meade Collection).

on her hip and she was dancing even when she walked." Later in life, Hermes jovially recalled being six years old and wanting to go to dance class with his sister. After weeks of subtle (and not so subtle) persuasion, he was finally permitted to attend the class. As soon as the instructor demonstrated a combination, Hermes copied it exactly and started to embellish it, to the delight of the rest of the class who stopped dancing to watch the boy perform spontaneously created steps. Not amused by Pan's upstaging, the instructor promptly kicked him out of the class, telling him never to return. It came as no surprise that two years later when Pantelis asked his eight-year-old son what he wanted to be when he grew up, Hermes answered, "A dancer." In a 15 May 1960 news item, Hermes added that his father "never asked me again. I guess he was shocked." Even though he had named his son, Hermes, in honor of the god in Greek mythology with winged feet, business-minded Pantelis could not imagine how his youngest child could support himself as a dancer.

In 1915, Mary's parents and younger sister returned to Nashville after spending nearly ten years in Memphis where they kept a watchful eye over the Panagiotopoulos family. Not uncharacteristically, Mary's relatives moved into

Pantelis, Hermes, Vasso, Mary, and Panos at the seashore (Courtesy of the Vasso Pan Meade Collection).

the Compton Street house and helped out in maintaining the family business. To entertain the children, the grandparents frequently took them to the Knickerbocker, a first-run silent film theatre, where, unlike his siblings who were fans of Tom Mix and William S. Hart, Hermes developed a fascination for *femme fatale* Theda Bara, nicknamed "The Vamp." The first of her films Pan witnessed was *Cleopatra* (1917) and the boy became mesmerized by her emotive glances and fantastically exotic costumes. He believed all the stories concocted by her publicists that she was the Egyptian-born daughter of an Italian sculptor and his paramour, a French actress, living in the shadow of the Sphinx (only later would Hermes discover that his idol was born Theodosia Burr Goodman in Cincinnati, Ohio). Pan's youthful imagination ran wild as he read about the adventures of "Serpent of the Nile" as Bara was often called, and he wrote to Fox Studios asking for a photograph so that she could be ever close to him. In "The Mortal Goddesses," a chapter from his unpublished autobiography, "Dancin' in the Movies," Pan noted that "A few weeks later, the glossy still arrived in the mail with an actual signature scrawled across the bottom. I was enchanted" (Pan, Columbia, Kramer 1983, 2a).

Aunt Betty with Hermes (Courtesy of the Vasso Pan Meade Collection).

Theda Bara was not the only fantasy the eight-year-old Pan had on his mind. In 1918, young Hermes began having a recurring nightmare about a scary old creature named Aunt Lucy Godfather who would chase him around the house until he awoke in a sweat. One night, Hermes dreamed that he turned around and pushed Aunt Lucy Godfather down the stairs, after which he never dreamed about his pursuer again. Given Pan's homosexuality it is tempting to read more into the conflation of genders in the dream than is merited, for Pan's grandmother died in 1918 and, as Kelly Sullivan Walden suggests, the dream was likely the boy's way of dealing with the loss of a beloved maternal figure (Walden 2006, 44, 83, 317).

Hermes's first experiences as a ballroom dancer occurred in 1920 when his father brought home an old Victrola and a pile of 78 rpm records. Imitating steps he saw performed by Sam Clark, his mammy's son (who was also his father's chauffeur and general houseboy),[3] Hermes and his sister, Ditty, improvised dances to tunes like the "Wabash Rag" for hours on end. Robin Coons's syndicated *Hollywood Notebook* (30 January 1935) notes:

> Sam was his black mammy's boy, a little older than Hermes. He was a genius at mechanics, a superlative chauffeur, a dream of a cook, and a

Sam Clark (Courtesy of the Vasso Pan Meade Collection).

> nonpareil at dancing. He was teaching Hermes the "Black Bottom" and the "Charleston" in the Panagiotopoulos kitchen long before those jazz prances had names. His black mammy was always singing, no matter what her frame of mind. When she was sulking, the blue notes were stressed a little more, that was all. The gardener, the handy man, and all the dusky crew kept vocal tom toms beating rhythms.

To his parents, Hermes's dancing was little more than an expression of youthful vitality. To Hermes and his sister, who both would become professional dancers, the experience was life affirming. In an essay called "Let's Dance," in *Memories*, Barbara Leaming adds: "It was in these informal sessions with Clark that Pan developed the lifelong passion for broken rhythms and afterbeats that made him a natural collaborator with Astaire, who had cultivated his own love of black dancing on the vaudeville circuit. While most whites tap-danced on their toes—a style Pan derides as 'tippytoes' and Astaire called 'pussyfooting'—Sam Clark and other black dancers used toe *and* heel, producing a much stronger sound" (Leaming 1990, 2).

In 1920, Hermes was ten years old and breezing through the fifth grade at public school. Vasso, nearly four years older, was a student at the prestigious

Dot, Hermes, Aljeanne, and Vasso in Florida (Courtesy of the Vasso Pan Meade Collection).

Ward-Belmont School for Women located a few short blocks away from the Panagiotopoulos home on Compton Street. Eighteen-year-old Panos was completing high school and acting girl crazy. After several false starts, he would find the love of his life in Dorothy ("Dot") Bainbridge who became his wife before the end of the year.

In the final months of 1920, Pantelis began to feel more fatigued than usual after work. He thought little of that and his loss of appetite until fever, chills, and difficulty breathing were added to the list of symptoms. By the time he found it necessary to see a doctor, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis and advised to move to a climate that was more amenable to the control of the disease. Mary organized a spring trip to Florida for the family including Panos, Dot, and their new baby daughter, Aljeanne, whose appearance not long after the wedding caused quite a stir among the Panagiotopoulos clan. Sam Clark tagged along as family chauffeur for a vacation of sun and fun while the Ocean Restaurant was left in the care of Charles Huston. As David Patrick Columbia noted, Mary was "a fanciful, easy-going spirit who appreciated her children's pleasures" (Columbia, May 1991, 759). By this time, Panos and his wife had shortened the family name to Pan, for the 1922 Nashville City Directory lists them as Panos and Dorothy Pan, living at 807

Fatherland. The trip to Florida had been designed in the hope that the ocean air would be beneficial to Pantelis, but in a short time, it was obvious that what he needed was a dry, warm climate. After much delay, caused by concerns over the day-to-day operation of the restaurant and the financial security of the family, Pantelis moved to a sanitarium in San Antonio where he appeared to be getting stronger.

Early in November, Pantelis took a turn for the worse and, on 10 November 1922, Mary was notified that her husband had passed away. Once again, Mary assembled her family and they boarded a train for San Antonio to retrieve the body. A week later, they returned home and buried Pantelis according to the rites of the Greek Orthodox Church in the Old Cemetery of Nashville. Prior to the funeral, Alkis emerged like a villain out of a nineteenth-century melodrama, drunkenly brandishing a gun, and demanding the body of his deceased sibling. "You'll have my brother's body in life, but not in death!" he threatened. Fortunately, he was easily disarmed and the ceremony proceeded without further incident.

The unexpected death of Pantelis meant more to the members of the Panagiotopoulos family than simply the loss of a father. It signaled the end of life as they knew it. No one was prepared to deal with the repercussions and change of lifestyle, least of all twelve-year-old Hermes. Somehow Mary and her father managed to keep the restaurant going, but after Hermes graduated from the eighth grade (the full extent of his education) in the spring of 1923, Mary decided that she had had enough of Nashville. She was thirty-nine years old and felt she deserved to live a little. On a whim, she sold the Ocean Restaurant and the house on Compton Street, piled her family into a new Ford Model T she purchased, and directed Sam Clark to drive them to New York City, where she idealistically hoped that her family would flourish. Mary resolved that Panagiotopoulos was far too complicated and exotic a name for life in New York City and, following Panos's example, abbreviated it to Pan. From 1923 on, Hermes Panagiotopoulos would become Hermes Pan, god of the winged feet and player of the pipes.

2

Try Dancing

When the Pans arrived in New York in 1923, what they saw was a city of almost endless possibilities. Broadway was singing the music of Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, Richard Rodgers, Rudolf Friml, Sigmund Romberg, and Vincent Youmans. Speakeasies gave, as their name might suggest, easy access to liquor outlawed by the Volstead Act in 1919. The Harlem Renaissance helped disseminate jazz and African-American dance styles to white audiences and a system of subways and trains enabled inhabitants to travel around the city and from the city to the rest of the country. Mary Pan most likely was unaware when she brought young Hermes to New York how expedient the city would be for her son's career.

Feeling flush from the sale of her property in Tennessee, Mary rented a spacious apartment at 175 West 81st Street, virtually on the corner of Amsterdam Avenue. Panos and his wife and baby shared a bedroom, while Hermes, Vasso, Sam, and Mary each had their own living spaces. The first several months the family spent in New York felt like an extended vacation. No work needed to be done; no school needed to be attended. The Pans lived the booming lives of affluent tourists. Hermes recalled that he and his sister would playfully walk down crowded thoroughfares side by side with locked arms shouting "Pushy, pushy" as they plowed their way through what Pan imagined to be an endless stream of people. Together they saw Al Jolson in *Bombo*, a revival of *Blossom Time*, *The Ziegfeld Follies*, the *George White Scandals*, and *Running Wild*, an African-American musical that made an especially deep impression on young Hermes Pan. It was the show that introduced the most influential song of the era, "Charleston." When not at the theatre, the Pans visited the parks and zoos and museums in what appeared to be a city of infinite delights.

After about six months, however, the delights ended when the money ran out. Mary had never been educated in financial affairs, happy to let her husband handle the business end of the relationship. More like a child, used to getting money but never wondering where it came from, Mary wired to her father in Nashville asking him to send money from her account. The next day, Charles Huston replied that she was penniless. Further investigation revealed that Uncle Alkis, brandishing a bogus partnership agreement with Pantelis (written entirely