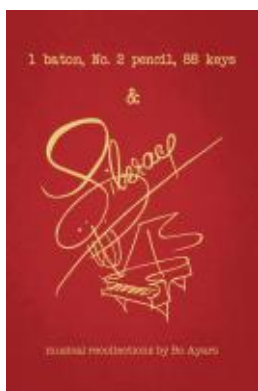


1 baton, No. 2 pencil, 88 keys

&



musical recollections by Bo Ayars



*1 Baton, No. 2 Pencil, 88 Keys and Liberace, by Bo Ayars, is a collection of musical memories from his years spent in the entertainment profession. From child prodigy in Bakersfield, California, to conductor for celebrity entertainers in Las Vegas, it's a well-traveled road with many stops: piano bars, lounge shows, off-Broadway productions and symphony orchestras, all leading to his thirteen-year tenure with Mr. Showmanship, Liberace.*

## **1 Baton, No. 2 Pencil, 88 Keys, & Liberace**

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Liberace:  
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**My years with “Mr. Showmanship,”  
“The King,” and others  
who made Vegas, Vegas**

**Bo Ayars**

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ISBN: 978-1-63491-362-1

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2016

First Edition

Cover design: Joni DeRouchie

Book layout: Mark Merrill

Editor & Back cover: Elie Charpentier

## 1.

### The Call

My dream job started with a phone call from Seymour Heller, Liberace's business manager. It was the call that changed my life. And I remember it as if it were yesterday: I was sitting in a woven-reed, aluminum-framed chair in the living room of my apartment on the Las Vegas Country Club golf course.

"Lee says he likes you," Seymour began. Lee's real, Americanized name was Walter Valentino Liberace, but he insisted his friends call him Lee.

"I think we get along," I replied. Seymour was very well known as a manager and agent, having represented some of the biggest musical names in show business, including Guy Lombardo, Tommy Dorsey, and Glenn Miller.

"Gordon is going to retire. You probably already knew that."

Not just I, but everyone, knew that Gordon Robinson, Liberace's conductor of twenty-six years, was stepping down. News like that traveled fast in the Entertainment Capital of the World.

“Yes, that’s what I understand,” I said, trying to sound relaxed—indifferent, even.

“Lee thinks you’re the guy to replace him, but we need to be certain. Can you make it up to Sparks? We wanna be sure you’re a fit. Maybe conduct a few shows, see how it works out? He wants to make sure the two of you work well together, and he wants you to get to know the show,” he said.

Musically, I knew I was ready to be in charge of an orchestra that would back up someone like Liberace—*Mr. Showmanship*.

“Sure, I can do that.”

I couldn’t tell from Seymour’s words what he thought of me becoming the new music director for his biggest client, but I thought I detected a little sigh of relief.

“Oh,” he said as an afterthought, “and I’ll send you the financial details.”

Money. I didn’t care about the money. I just wanted the job. And now, I realized the job was mine—well, almost mine. I never had cared too much about money, but now I realized I should be a little practical and not give everything away. So I said,

“Maybe you could give me an idea now.”

Seymour responded with a figure. I don’t exactly remember, but it was about the same as what I was already

making. I knew I was worth more. I'd been on the Las Vegas scene long enough to not only have worked with—but to have held my own with—Elvis Presley, Barbra Streisand, Robert Goulet, Connie Stevens, Diahann Carroll, Jim Nabors, and others. I knew how to use my hands to lead a group of musicians. I knew how to manage a rehearsal and how to quickly solve a multitude of musical problems. Yeah, I was worth more.

"Seymour, I'll need more than that," I said. I think my whole body shut down for about five seconds, waiting for his answer.

"Well, I can give some, but not a lot. How about twelve hundred a week?" he said.

I didn't reply. I sat there thinking that Joe Guercio, my mentor, was the greatest career maker in Vegas for a reason, and that Seymour knew it. I wouldn't come cheap. And I waited. After about ten seconds of silence, Seymour said,

"Bo, hang on, I'll be right back." And the line went dead. All I could think was that I'd blown it, my dream job, all because of money. Then, suddenly, he came back on the line.

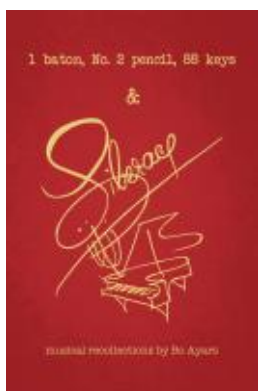
"OK, we can't go any higher, but we can do first-class airfare everywhere you go. There's a lot of travel involved, as you know, and Lee will probably want to go over some of the details of the shows while we're traveling."

Seymour had hit my soft spot. I've never been a small guy, so the wider, first-class seats would be a godsend, given all the time I'd be flying with Liberace. I figured that any additional salary concerns could be addressed later.

"That sounds good to me," I said, finally able to breathe normally.

I now realize that, although I was musically ready for the job, emotionally, I wasn't. In the past, handling my emotions had been fairly easy. I had simply put a lid on them; had ignored them—and the emotions of others—while focusing on my work. Now, as I noticed that people listened to me more intently—not necessarily because of what I was saying, but because of my lofty position—the prestige of being Lee's conductor quickly took over and fueled even more my overwhelming need to be in control, to be the center of attention. I found myself walking a little taller, speaking more authoritatively, and ordering things be done instead of asking, because I knew that what I said was now more important because of my job. *Didn't people know who I was?* I was special. And, ever since I can remember, I've always believed I was special—different—but in a good way. Unique. And I think it all started with how I came into this world.





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