



Ann-Margret

MY STORY

'The gripping story of a brave woman's life. Ann-Margret has been to hell and back' DAILY EXPRESS

'Her life story reads like the Hollywood movies
she's starred in'

TODAY

Ann-Margret has dazzled screen and stage audiences as few entertainers in our time with a magnetic presence that remains undiminished in its power. Yet the woman behind the glamorous image and the scintillating performances has remained an enigma.

Now for the first time Ann-Margret opens the door to her private world, in a memoir that tells her life as it really was. We learn of her long-time relationship with Elvis Presley; her battle with and inspiring recovery from alcohol abuse; and she writes movingly of her husband's struggle with serious disease, a condition that forced her for the first time to take control of both their lives. Full of wit, warmth and candour, this is the inspiring story of a remarkable woman battling to be herself.

'An honest, heart-felt portrait of a real survivor'

TIME OUT

ORION
NON-FICTION/AUTOBIOGRAPHY
UK £5.99
AUS \$14.95 RRP

ANN-MARGRET

MY STORY

Ann-Margret

with Todd Gold



An Orion paperback

First published in Great Britain by Orion in 1994

This paperback edition published in 1995 by Orion Books Ltd,
Orion House, 5 Upper St Martin's Lane, London WC2H 9EA

Copyright © 1994 by Ann-Margret Productions

Published by arrangement with G P Putnam's Sons
a division of the Putnam Berkley Group, Inc, New York

The authors gratefully acknowledge permission to reprint lyrics from
"Once Before I Go" by Peter Allen and Dean Pitchford,

© 1982 Warner-Tamerlane Publishing Corp., Woolnough Music, My Macaroon Tunes,
Jemava Music Corp. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

The right of Ann-Margret and Todd Gold to be identified as the authors of
this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication
may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted,
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the
prior permission of the copyright owner.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

ISBN: 1 85797 807 2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

*To my father, mother,
and Roger*



AUTHOR'S NOTE

IN PREPARING FOR WRITING THIS BOOK, WHICH IS PERHAPS THE hardest thing I have ever done, I told myself I would conquer some fears and also wipe away some of the mist that had enveloped me for so long. I knew all about the Ann-Margret mystique. I was said to be a recluse, a fragile woman consumed by fear, a tragic heroine controlled by a strong husband. I was an enigma to many people, including those closest to me, and sometimes even to myself.

I felt it was time to change all that, to embrace candor and a willingness to try new things. For many years, I had harbored a fear of performing live in New York City. So, in the fall of 1991, I brought my act to Radio City Music Hall and faced the critics, the audience, my past, and all my inner

demons. I figured I had better do it while I could still kick. Like all Swedes, I was raised to be intensely modest, but I must admit I was tickled by the reviews and the packed, enthusiastic audiences. Most importantly, I felt I had passed a test of strength, achieved a degree of courage.

I felt the same way about writing an autobiography and letting people hear the truth. I knew it wouldn't be easy to cast off my innate reserve and privacy, but I believed it was important that I write about the people and events that have shaped my life and career. Besides, if I waited too long, someone who didn't know me would do it, relying on press clippings and distortions.

As I see it, my tale is both unique and universal. I've had many successes, but also, like anyone else, my share of sadness. I'm a mom, a wife, and a crazy performer who likes to drive a motorcycle and kick up her heels. When certain music plays, I don't hear anything else. I'm very emotional, and if a song moves me, I try to include it in my act. It's almost a spiritual thing. I've just got to do it.

I'm sometimes mixed up, but I'm always me, Ann-Margret Olsson Smith, though I dropped the Olsson years ago because I didn't want my parents to feel any embarrassment if there was negative publicity from my being in show business. I'm also quite proud.

Shortly after I arrived in America as a little girl, my Uncle Arvid, a carpenter, fashioned a small wooden toy box for me and painted it marmalade orange. As toys became less important to me, I used the box to store the keepsakes of my girlhood—letters, ribbons, cards, awards, and treasures that meant the world to me.

I recall the times I sat on my bed, the bedroom door shut and the house quiet, and sifted through the box's sundry contents. Occasionally, I invited one of my cousins or friends to sit down with me and go through the box. I pulled things out, particular things—certainly not everything—and told stories that made me laugh, cry, smile, and mostly just remember.

This book is a lot like that great old toy box of mine. It's full of the things I've saved, the people I've treasured, the experiences I've been lucky to have. Good times, heartaches, triumphs, tragedies, celebrations, losses, mistakes, and incredible good fortune . . . I hope and pray that they're all in here.

INTRODUCTION

AS SOMEONE WHO HAS BEEN PROTECTED, CARED FOR, AND shielded for most of her adult life, I knew I was absurdly, pathetically ill-prepared for what lay ahead. I slid behind the wheel of our car, in itself a departure, adjusted dark glasses over my wet eyes, and headed for St. John's Hospital in Santa Monica. I looked at my husband Roger in the seat next to me, tired and lethargic, drifting in and out of a netherworld of exhaustion, and I knew then the roles were reversing.

I thought how he had cared for me after I fell nearly twenty-two feet from a platform onto a stage in Lake Tahoe, about how much he loved me and protected me, and how fate was now telling me it was my turn to take over. Although it seemed an impossible undertaking, I knew I must do it. For

both of our sakes, I had to become the assertive, take-charge woman I had never pretended or cared to be.

I pulled into the hospital, where Roger was scheduled to see a specialist to diagnose the mysterious ailment that had come on so insidiously. My tall, strong husband was never sick, but for longer than we could pinpoint—a year, perhaps—he had felt a gnawing fatigue, an unexplained tiredness.

“It’s nothing,” I remember him saying. “Nothing to worry about.”

At first, I had tried to put it out of my head. I was preoccupied with my own problems. Three times during this period I had been sure I was pregnant, then had been bitterly disappointed. Hence, it was easy for me to deny what was happening to Roger, to pretend everything was fine. Yet, there were days when Roger simply couldn’t get out of bed, and for a man who was as driven, as frenetic as my husband, something was woefully wrong. In our family, Roger not only took charge of all the household details, he ran every aspect of my career—negotiating contracts, screening scripts, handling my investments, and producing my nightclub acts. Whenever I was onstage, Roger was in the wings, watching and worrying; if he thought I was exhausted at the end of a show, he would sometimes even lift me in his arms and carry me back to my dressing room.

But now, increasingly, Roger had to will himself to get dressed in the morning. His muscles were betraying him, and we were both terrified. It would have been so easy for me to have succumbed again to drinking, the weakness that had plagued me for five years. But somehow, I managed to collect

myself, took charge, and insisted that Roger see a doctor. And he had nodded, a compliance that sent a chill through me.

As I listened to the diagnosis we heard after the visit to St. John's, I was calm. We were told on that day twelve years ago that Roger had myasthenia gravis, a neuromuscular disease that was incurable. This was the same illness that had robbed Aristotle Onassis of his vitality, and now it was threatening Roger.

It would have been natural for me to fold then, and I truly think many people would have suspected it of me, given my dependence on Roger. But there comes a point in life when clothes, money, and a large home in the hills mean nothing, when awards aren't worth the paper they're printed on, when jewels and fancy cars are worthless, when everything just stops.

Time stopped, then it started again in a new way. Roger and I would beat this, we decided, and I would shield him from all the worries and cares he had once assumed. I picked up the phone and talked to the agents; I learned about the stocks, bonds, and real-estate matters Roger had handled. I also attended to the leaking roof, broken appliances, and hill-sides sliding after the rains. For some time now, Roger's three children had been living with us and I tried to handle, as best I could, all their problems as well.

I trudged along, worrying that I was making mistakes, asking lots of questions to make sure I wasn't being taken advantage of, but slowly and surely gaining confidence. I never let Roger know the extent of my fear or exhaustion, but there were plenty of harrowing nights when I cried, sitting in my backyard in the Los Angeles hills.

I must have been doing something right, because God was on our side. After visits to UCLA Medical Center and the Mayo Clinic, after months of various medications and treatments, doctors and worries, Roger's health slowly improved, but his disease could reoccur at any time.

Roger was quietly grateful, prayerful, and calm. I began thinking about the day there will be a cure, and felt a surge of hope. Both of us are very different people today. Roger has slowly asserted much of his old role in the family, but I will never be that same submissive, fearful woman.

I have come a long way from my sheltered youth. The shy little girl is still there, but she has stepped aside, making way for a stronger, more confident woman. I'm a tough, stubborn Taurus. And I come from equally tough stock. I did exactly what no one expected me to do, including me!



SOMETIMES THERE IS A MOMENT IN YOUR EARLY YEARS THAT haunts you and defines your past, your present, even your future. For me, it was auditioning for what would become my official performing debut, the Morris B. Sachs *Amateur Hour*, a Chicago talent show that struggled to rival Ted Mack's. I was thirteen, with brown hair, a shaky smile, and a shyness so intense that I had sat paralyzed in the studio, tortured by nerves and fears. My terror had been palpable, visible to all around me, but miraculously ephemeral. The minute my name had been called, the minute the music started, the other Ann-Margret Olsson had emerged, a prancing, gyrating, uninhibited performer totally consumed by singing, dancing, and pleasing the audience.

As I returned to my seat and savored the applause, I withdrew again and huddled at my mother's side.

"I can't believe she's the same girl. Turns it off and on," I heard someone say.

"I can't believe it's the same girl."

I repeated those words to myself again and again. I knew I would hear that comment throughout my career, and I have.

I suppose, in a way, there are indeed two Ann-Margrets. I wish I could tell you that I fully know and understand both of them, but I would be lying. I *do* know what makes Ann-Margret "The Performer" emerge, and it's very literally the sound of music. I hear a beat, a tempo that moves me and it's as if I'm transfixed. And it's been that way right from the beginning, when I was just a little thing with ringlets, big eyes, and an adoring audience of Swedish relatives.

In Valsjöbyn, Sweden, where I spent the first six years of my life, music was the major release. In this tiny (population: 150) town of lumberjacks and farmers high up near the Arctic Circle, there were no movie theaters and few radios. But there was always the sound of my mother singing cheerful folk tunes, and by the time I was three, she and I were harmonizing virtually every evening. My mother's brother, Uncle Calle, often added his accordion. At get-togethers, my other relatives joined in, too. Of course, even then I was a ham and loved to take center stage. I quickly learned that I had a pleasant singing voice and that people responded to it. But what mattered most to me was the happiness I saw in my mother's face when she heard me sing. At three, I certainly had no