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Martha Tilton, 91, 'Sweetheart of Swing,' Dies

By [DOUGLAS MARTIN](#)

Martha Tilton, who as one of Benny Goodman's vocalists in the 1930s was billed as the "Sweetheart of Swing" and appeared on 80 of his recordings, including the celebrated 1939 rendition of "And the Angels Sing," died on Dec. 8 at her home in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Brentwood. She was 91.

Her Web site announced the death, suggesting that another singer was needed for "the big U.S.O. Show in the Sky."

On Jan. 16, 1938, Miss Tilton marshaled her easygoing, almost girlish voice to win excellent reviews for her singing in the first purely jazz concert ever held at [Carnegie Hall](#). Her "Loch Lomond," a swing version of a Scottish air that was later a hit for Maxine Sullivan, received one of the evening's largest ovations.

In her solo career, she became one of the first artists to record with Capitol Records, for which she made hits like "I'll Walk Alone." She appeared on her own radio show in the early 1940s, and became known as Liltin' Martha Tilton or the Liltin' Miss Tilton.

She appeared in movies, including playing a singer based on herself in "The Benny Goodman Story" (1955). She provided singing voices for film stars like [Barbara Stanwyck](#), Martha O'Driscoll and Anne Gwynne.

Martha Ellen Tilton was born on Nov. 14, 1915, in Corpus Christi, Tex., and her family moved to Edna, Kan., when she was 3. In 1922, they moved to Los Angeles, where her father was a banker.

Her family sang and played the piano, and she began singing without pay at a small radio station while still in high school in Los Angeles. An agent heard her and found her work singing for money at larger stations. She dropped out of school in the 11th grade to join Hal Grayson's band.

She was part of a vocal group, Three Hits and a Miss, when she was asked to audition for the Goodman band. Mr. Goodman left the room during her second song, so she left too, disappointed that he was not impressed. She later learned that he had liked her, and was hired for \$125 a week in 1937.

The song "And the Angels Sing" was brought to Mr. Goodman by Ziggy Elman, one of his trumpeters, who had recorded it as an instrumental. What had originated as a Hebrew folk song became "one of the most joyous-sounding records of the swing era," George T. Simon wrote in "The Big Bands Songbook" (1975).

Miss Tilton later sang with Artie Shaw and Billy Mills, among others. She recorded on her own for

Capitol from 1942 to 1949 and later for smaller labels, including Coral and Tops.

During and just after World War II, she appeared with [Jack Benny](#) and others on U.S.O. tours to entertain troops in the South Pacific and Europe. Miss Tilton's marriages to Dave Thomas and Leonard Vannerson ended in divorce. She is survived by her husband, James Brooks; her son, Jon Vannerson; her daughter, Cathy Smith; and five grandchildren.

Early in her career Miss Tilton was introduced by Mr. Goodman as "a pretty gal from Hollywood that's really going places." She missed the cue. After a moment, Mr. Goodman ad-libbed, "She's not going places, she's already gone."

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