

Thurl's Biography

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Thurl Arthur Ravenscroft was born February 6, 1914 in Norfolk, Nebraska. He moved to California in 1933 to study interior design at the Otis Art Institute. While in school he was encouraged to go into show business by Sir Guy Standing, who noticed Thurl's flair for comedy at a party. Thurl did not give it too much thought until a fellow member in his church choir suggested he audition at Paramount to be a studio singer. Before long, he began to get so many calls for jobs that he had no time for art school. Thurl always thought that if show business did not work out, he could always go back to school. He never did.



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By the mid-1930s, Thurl was appearing regularly on radio, first on a show called the *Goose Creek Parson*. In the late 1930s, he moved on to the *The Kraft Music Hall* starring Bing Crosby. He sang backup for Bing, and any guests on the show, as part of the Paul Taylor Choristers. Thurl recalled that there were "eight guys and six gals all standing around one microphone." It was during this time that Thurl first met Spike Jones who, as a member of the NBC Studio Orchestra, was the drummer for the show.

A couple of the guys in the Paul Taylor Choristers, Bill Days and Max Smith, decided to form a quartet of their own which they called the Metropolitans. They later changed the name to the [Sportsmen](#). About a month after the quartet was formed, Thurl joined them, replacing Don Craig. In 1942 Thurl, as the youngest and only unmarried member of the group, left the quartet to enlist in the Air Transport Command. He served five years as a navigator and flew all sorts of special missions over the North Atlantic. During his time in the ATC, he met his future wife, June, who was Assistant Chief Hostess for TWA. They were married three weeks later in her hometown in Virginia on July 21, 1946.

When Thurl's military service ended in 1947, he returned to Hollywood with his bride. Thurl intended to rejoin the Sportsmen, who were now regulars on Jack Benny's radio show. Thurl's replacement, Gurney Bell, did not want to leave the group. Gurney's wife threatened to sue Jack Benny if Gurney were fired, so Jack fired the entire quartet with the intention of rehiring them the next season once personnel issues were resolved. While Thurl made a few appearances with the Sportsmen after the war, he never got his job back. Max Smith left the Sportsmen in 1948, and shortly thereafter he and Thurl formed the [Mellomen](#). The Sportsmen continued to do mostly radio and live appearances. The Mellomen ended up doing everything: radio, film, television, commercials, and backup vocals for almost anyone. Thurl said they prided themselves on being able to do it all, from jazz, bebop, and barbershop to opera, and even rock-and-roll.

Thurl at microphone



The Mellomen were very busy during the 1950s and early 1960s. They worked with the biggest names in Hollywood, from Danny Kaye and Rosemary Clooney to Frank Sinatra and Elvis Presley. They worked for Walt Disney in films, on television, and on records. They worked on radio with Edgar Bergen. They formed the core of the Norman Luboff Choir. They performed commercial jingles for anything from beer to breakfast cereal. Thurl recalled that, at one time, the Mellomen had 28 different beer accounts for which they did commercials. They did a few commercials for Kellogg's Corn Flakes and Sugar Corn Pops. These spots led to one of Thurl's most enduring assignments: *Tony the Tiger*. Beginning in 1952, Thurl was the one and only voice of Tony.

In 1966, Dr. Seuss and Chuck Jones teamed up to do *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* for CBS television. Thurl remembered the Grinch fondly, saying, "That was my chance to prove I could really sing." The success of the Grinch led to other projects with Dr. Seuss. His voice can be heard in *Horton Hears a Who*, *The Cat in the Hat*, and *The Lorax*, among others.

His singing career continued well into the 1970s, his vocal talent being used by such singers as Arlo

Guthrie and Jim Nabors. As a member of the Johnny Mann Singers, he sang on 28 albums, appeared on television for three seasons, and performed at the White House twice in the early 1970s.

Beginning in 1973, he narrated the *Pageant of the Masters* at the Laguna Beach Arts Festival each summer, a job that lasted 20 years. Thurl described the *tableaux vivants*, paintings brought to life on stage. By doing the narration, Thurl said he learned more about art than he did in art school. He would have continued beyond 1993, but climbing up to the announcer's booth every night got to be too difficult.

Throughout his career, Thurl devoted time to activities in the Christian field. He appeared frequently on *The Hour of Power* as a soloist, and narrated "The Glory of Christmas" at the Crystal Cathedral, located in Garden Grove, California starting in 1981. His solo album, *Great Hymns in Story and Song* (1970), features some of the best known gospel songs and the stories behind them. He also recorded the Book of Psalms for the visually impaired and narrated the album *God's Plan for You*, a selection of scriptures from the Bible. In 2002, Thurl recorded an album with his son Ron called *Psalms & Selahs*.

In 1999, his wife June, passed away at the age of 80. They had been married for 53 years. Thurl continued to provide the voice for Tony the Tiger into the new millennium. His daughter Nancy arranged for a surprise party to celebrate Thurl's 90th birthday. Many of the guests were people he had worked with over his long career. Guests included Bill Cole, Johnny Mann, Gene Merlino, and Louie Jean Norman as well as representatives from Kellogg's and the Laguna Beach Arts Festival.

Thurl's 90th birthday



Thurl's remarkable life came to an end Sunday, May 22, 2005, at the age of 91. He is survived by his two children, Ron and Nancy, and four grandchildren.

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[Brian E. Jacob](#)