



# INSTAGRAM CONSIDERED

BY ALEX HITZ

*This page: Alex's aunt Hollace Shaw—Aunt Holly—was a coloratura soprano who found fame as a radio star of the 1930s and '40s. In a world long before Instagram, she was an original fashion icon—or “influencer.”*



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## IMPRESSIVE "ENVELOPPE"

Luxurious suede wool cape, called "enveloppe" by designer Maurice Rentner, was selected by CBS singing star Hollace ("Saturday Night Serenade") Shaw in a sunset orange tone embroidered with light-reflecting crystal. Expertly moulded waistline catches the adroitly draped fabric in a body embracing line that requires no closing fasteners.

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Crystal embroidered sunset orange suede wool was used by designer Maurice Rentner to introduce his new "enveloppe" evening cape modelled by CBS singing star Hollace ("Saturday Night Serenade") Shaw.

ON BOATS, AT TABLES, on courts, courses, and beaches, as this summer wound down from East Hampton to Nantucket to Maine, there's but one word that cropped up, endlessly: Instagram. To the point that, for me, it became distracting. Granted, Instagram isn't exactly new, but somehow its siren song has recently reached a shrill crescendo. For one specimen week in August, I decided I would

count how many times I heard that word uttered this place or that—including more than two dozen mentions in one day alone in the *New York Times*—and the whopping total was more than 300. That's just what I observed, and remembered to count, in one week. Now, doesn't that seem like a lot?

My aunt, Hollace Shaw, was a radio singing star in the 1930s and '40s. Born

in Fresno, California, in 1913, Holly was a pretty blonde, an ingénue, a coloratura soprano with an unusual nearly two-octave range. She came to New York in 1929 to attend Juilliard. At school, Holly and her range were discovered by Jerome Kern, a superstar Broadway composer of his day, and he got her a radio job on Phil Spitalny's "The Hour of Charm," circa 1935. She sang and played a char-



**Left to right: Great American Songbook doyens Jerome Kern (who wrote “All the Things You Are” for Holly), Dorothy Fields, and George Gershwin; the great Fred Astaire, one of Holly’s close friends, who delivered her eulogy; the maestro Arturo Toscanini, one of Holly’s collaborators and friends.**

acter called “Vivian,” an ingénue. The gimmick for that program was that it was a 22-piece—voluptuous, to be sure—all-girl orchestra. “The Hour of Charm” was hosted by Arlene Francis, who later became television famous on “What’s My Line,” and who took a liking to Holly and introduced her around town to the Broadway and radio giants of the day. All of a sudden, Holly was on the scene, on fire, and her career soared. Little Holly Shaw from Fresno came to call Toscanini, the Gershwins, Cole Porter, and Dorothy Fields collaborators and friends.

In the 1930s, the big radio song hits were often take-out numbers from Broadway shows, and Broadway flourished, mounting literally hundreds of productions a year. Jerome Kern, who was by then perhaps more than a friend, wrote new songs for a whole show for Holly, 1938’s *Very Warm for May*. Although the show only lasted 16 performances, Holly’s take-out number, “All the Things You Are,” tailored specifically to that two-octave range, became an eternal standard recorded by countless others in what we now call “The Great American Songbook.” I’m sure you know it.

In the early ‘40s, Aunt Holly, redone from stem to stern, transitioned from “ingénue soprano” to “glamorous singing star” with help from Norman Norrell, Maurice Rentner, and Elizabeth Arden. She was tapped to be the star of CBS’s biggest primetime Saturday night show, “Saturday Night Serenade.” She was white-hot. If she wasn’t at fittings

or coiffeurs, she spent hours each day signing photographs for her fans. Soap brands, dress lines, and perfumes asked her to endorse them. Millions of listeners enjoyed her for almost a decade every Saturday night at eight o’clock when, inconceivable as it may seem now, generations of families sat around the radio listening for hours at a time.

America loved big bands like Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey, or Artie Shaw live from cosmopolitan capitals and nightclubs, and comedy shows like “Amos and Andy” (another jolt to today’s sensibilities), “Fibber McGhee and Molly,” Jack Benny, or Edgar Bergen. They couldn’t get enough of detective stories like “The Adventures of Sam Spade” or “The Shadow.” FDR’s “Fireside Chats,” with crackling avuncular warmth broadcast to the mass bleakness of the Great Depression, were the first regularly scheduled messages from any president. The lives of Americans were succinctly timed around favorite shows, and more than anything that had ever united the country on such scale, radio was a way of life, a Golden Age. And Hollace Shaw was a prime-time star.

But nothing gold can stay. By the late 1940s and early 1950s, radio was a thing of the past. Television changed the world. Just as when silent movies changed to talkies, few stars made the transition. Aunt Holly, the “glamorous singing star,” retired before the age of 40 to oblivion and became a fragile and defeated Beverly Hills housewife prone to the

“lying-down disease.” She only went out at night. In the brilliant sun of California, Aunt Holly’s last two decades were spent inside, in bed, in shadows. She died at age 62.

What I remember most about her as a child, as the “natural look” of the ‘70s took hold, was her actressy appearance: the platinum color of her hair in its lavish up-do and her lacquered red nails stuck in the 1940s, when she was in her prime. She was always carefully turned out in shoulder-padded evening suits and heavy diamond brooches. She smelled like Jungle Gardenia, for whom she had been a pitch-woman at some point. She wore satin ankle-strap shoes and nylons with seams in the back. When we flew from Atlanta to her funeral at All Saints Episcopal Church on Santa Monica Boulevard in 1976, Fred Astaire, one of her best friends from the old days, gave the eulogy.

So, while the proliferation of time-suckers like Instagram and others is a definite way of the world and keeps us “connected,” it suddenly seemed relevant to tell you the story of Aunt Holly, who connected with millions and millions of people for many, many years yet died an unknown recluse. And while the connectivity through electronic devices seems really real, I guess it’s safe to say that it’s not really that real. You’ll make your own decisions...but I’m off to post this fab photo of Aunt Holly from the height of her glory on my Instagram.

#dontputallyoureggsinonebasket. ♦