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Lamb Chop, the Next Generation

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Slumped inside a Tupperware container with no one to talk to, Lamb Chop must have found the yearlong silence intolerable. She couldn't wave her red mittens. She couldn't peer seductively through her mink eyelashes. And she couldn't get answers to the stream of questions that bothered her night and day.

Now, the dark part of life for the 17-inch sock puppet seems to have ended.

"Do I look taller in person?" she demanded on a recent afternoon in Malibu. At arm's length from Lamb Chop sat Mallory Lewis, a television producer and the daughter of the late puppeteer Shari Lewis.

For decades, Lamb Chop and Shari Lewis were pioneers in children's television, winning awards and affection across three generations. They bumped Howdy Doody off network television, dined with three U.S. presidents and testified on Capitol Hill.

But when Shari Lewis died in August 1998 of uterine cancer at age 65, Lamb Chop was set aside, indefinitely.

"After Mom died, we were getting a lot of letters from kids saying, 'Is Lamb Chop dead too?' Or 'Lamb Chop must be very sad,'" said Mallory. "I knew Lamb Chop couldn't be dead too."

Last summer, Mallory Lewis pulled Lamb Chop onto her right hand--a hand that is, by the way, the exact same size as her mother's, which enables Lamb Chop's "facial expressions" to maintain their integrity.

But the new partnership poses an interesting question for the galaxy of hand-puppet philosophers out there: Can a puppet's soul be transferred from one master to another? A small group of artists has attempted to reinhabit such characters and met with mixed success.

After his father, Mel Blanc, died in 1989, Noel Blanc attempted to do some of the voice work for the 1,500 personalities his father had done for Looney Tunes. The list included such stars as Daffy Duck, Bugs Bunny, Porky Pig and Tweety Bird. But Noel Blanc admittedly did a weak imitation of his father, and he now works with Warner Bros. on its stable of digital voice replicas. Technology enables them

to splice and insert Mel Blanc's voices onto dozens of consumer products, such as talking hats and talking birthday candles.

"It's very difficult to have someone perform the characters when they didn't create them and didn't live them," Noel Blanc said. "It's almost impossible because we all become imitators, good or bad, of the original."

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Edgar Bergen made a career out of playing the straight man to his mischievous dummy, Charlie McCarthy. Bergen allowed only one other person--Dennis Alwood--to perform when he was sick. Still, Alwood said, the ritual of inhabiting, or even touching, a master's puppet is near sacrilege.

"I remember the first time Edgar asked me to dress Charlie," Alwood said. "We were at Magic Mountain, opening for Sonny & Cher, and I was shaking."

After Bergen's death in 1978, Alwood briefly performed with Charlie until he had a falling out with Bergen's children over money.

But these stories don't resonate with Mallory Lewis. Seated in her sun-filled Malibu home, she said she identifies with the son of Muppet creator Jim Henson, Brian, who successfully took over the Muppet empire (which includes Kermit the Frog and Miss Piggy) after his father died in 1990.

"I think there's always room for gentle television," Lewis said. "I have a career as a television producer, but performing with Lamb Chop is in my heart, and it's a way to connect with my mother on a daily basis." (Among the television projects Mallory Lewis has produced are PBS' "Charlie Horse Music Pizza, eight videos for A&M; Video ["Lamb Chop's Play Along"] and segments for MTV, the Travel Channel, "Real TV" and British Sky Broadcasting.)

Lamb Chop's reentry into make-believe has been helped by an appearance last fall on "The Rosie O'Donnell Show"; an upcoming merchandising tour in Japan (everything from boxer shorts to a Lamb Chop cell phone clip); and three Lamb Chop DVDs due to be released in the next year.

Last month, Lewis carried Lamb Chop up the steps to the stage of Radio City Music Hall to accept (posthumously) Shari Lewis' sixth Daytime Emmy for outstanding performer in a children's series.

"This was in front of the industry, and for Lamb Chop's future, her viability is very important," Lewis said. "All the people who do children's television were there. It was important for them to see Lamb Chop speak and to hear the loving response of the audience."

One of the largest talent agencies in the world, Creative Artists Agency, agreed to take on Lewis (and Lamb Chop) as clients last month.

And on Thursday, KIDSNET, the clearinghouse that provides ratings and guidance about children's programming, will hand out its first annual Lamb Chop Award for Excellence in Children's Programming.

"There are not a lot of things that we have in our culture that bring various people in different age groups of varying backgrounds together," said Karen Jaffe, executive director of KIDSNET. Lamb Chop "is an icon. The character is . . . the child, but a wise child. Sometimes she was irascible, but most of the time she was a childlike lamb."

That was the personality Mallory Lewis grew up with. Even when she was chronologically "younger" than Lamb Chop, the puppet was always simply a 6-year-old baby sister and Mallory maintained seniority. The two girls had sister-puppet confidentiality that could not be breached, even though Shari Lewis was right there, providing the words Lamb Chop would whisper to Mallory.

When she was 12 years old, Mallory began manipulating Lamb Chop's mouth and face, but she couldn't imitate the mischievous voice of a self-assured little girl with a stuffed-up nose.

By the time she had graduated from Barnard College, Mallory was producing her mother's public television shows that starred Lamb Chop and her friends, Hush Puppy and Charlie Horse.

Human actors, such as Dom DeLuise, also appeared on the shows. DeLuise was discovered on a New York stage by one of Shari Lewis' writers, who urged her to hire him for the television show.

"I was Kenny Ketchum, private detective. Get it--can he catch 'em? I also played a big baby in a carriage." said DeLuise, 65.

Acting with Shari Lewis and Lamb Chop was like working with two distinctly different individuals, he said.

"Lamb Chop was there saying, 'Can you keep a secret?' And there I am, leaning in to little Lamb Chop saying, 'Of course I can keep a secret,'" DeLuise said. "When you talk to Lamb Chop she really is very involved with her problems. She's like a little girl. She's hurt often and misunderstood. All the grown-ups don't understand her."

DeLuise last worked with Lamb Chop during the 1996 season of the public television show "Charlie Horse Music Pizza," during which he played Cookie the chef. But even after Shari Lewis' death, he maintained a friendship with Mallory and her husband, Brad Hood.

Last year, the three of them were finishing dinner when DeLuise asked if he could see Lamb Chop again. Mallory went into the bedroom of her infant son, Jaime, and pulled on the fleecy puppet.

"I gave Lamb Chop a kiss and we spoke for 15 minutes," DeLuise said in a phone interview that left him crying at one point. "When Mallory was doing Lamb Chop, she didn't hesitate at all. She was full of piss and vinegar," he said. "I didn't mention Shari. I said, 'I hope we can work together again, Lamb Chop.'"

He's not the only one. Lamb Chop was an industry whose appeal was immediate and long-lasting. With Shari's coaxing, Lamb Chop (reluctantly) learned to share, tell the truth and appreciate music--over and over again, for the children and grandchildren of her original viewers.

Her success began after two performances on "The Captain Kangaroo Show" in 1957, when Shari Lewis and Lamb Chop were offered their own local show. In 1960, NBC dropped "The Howdy Doody Show" from its Saturday morning lineup for "The Shari Lewis Show." That year, Lewis fought with a network censor because he wanted the word "bellybutton" deleted from one of Lamb Chop's limericks. Lewis managed to keep it in, and the show ran for three years.

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Lamb Chop and Shari entertained BBC audiences from 1968 to 1976 each Sunday night, while filming specials on Australian and Canadian television. Later, Shari starred in a succession of national public television series in the United States.

Shari Lewis and Lamb Chop were invited to the White House, under the Carter, Reagan and Bush administrations.

"Actually, I got the invitations and I took her, because I'm the star," Lamb Chop said, interrupting Mallory during the interview with The Times to answer questions about Shari's work and some of their special appearances over the years.

There was so much work and so many long days that every seven or eight weeks Lamb Chop would begin to turn a grayish yellow from the stage lighting and set dust. That was Pat Brymer's cue to begin another 18-hour day of Lamb Chop construction.

"Every Lamb Chop face was made on Shari Lewis' hand. That is what dictated where the eyelashes went," he said.

"It just happens that Mallory has exactly the same hand size as Shari," he said. (It's a good thing, too, because "fittings" for Lamb Chop's face took up to eight hours, and Mallory often filled in for her mother if she was too busy.)

After the eyelashes and little ears and T-shaped nose were attached, Brymer affixed the skinny upholstery-looped legs, the spindly arms and the white knit sweater with three red buttons down the middle.

Lamb Chop's appearance was never altered, except when she wore "gowns" for dressy occasions.

"I wore an off-the-shoulder number once that matched Shari's," Lamb Chop said.

Lamb Chop was not, however, restricted to Hollywood. In 1993 Shari Lewis and Lamb Chop were asked to testify before the House telecommunications subcommittee about the Children's Television Act, a law requiring TV stations to provide educational and informational programming.

For the record, Lamb Chop asked Rep. Edward J. Markey (D-Mass.) to have her testimony taken down as a separate statement from Shari's.

Shari Lewis won 12 Emmys, including one she shared with Mallory. To date, they are the only mother-daughter Emmy winners.

Shari Lewis also won a Peabody Award, the John F. Kennedy Center Award for Excellence and Creativity, seven Parents' Choice Awards, the Action for Children's Television Award, and in 1995 she won the Rommie Award for her CD-ROM "Lamb Chop Loves Music."

"Charlie Horse Music Pizza" is still running on public television, and 60 songs Shari Lewis recorded before her death have yet to air. There are countless other unfinished projects she had begun, but Mallory said she won't try to revive all of them.

She is committed to raising money to fight the disease that killed her mother, and her well-connected, wealthy Southern California family stands behind her. (Mallory's paternal aunt is novelist Judith Krantz, and her father, Jeremy Tarcher, is a well-known book publisher.)

With Lamb Chop in tow, Mallory and her husband took time away from their production company, Jump Run Productions Inc., to organize "Jump for the Cause," which raised \$300,000 in 1999 for cancer research. And with 118 women linked in a skydiving formation, it also broke the world record.

Lamb Chop was stuffed inside Mallory's jumpsuit during the event, and the puppet likes to mention that world record jump as proof that she can do almost anything.

Except read this article.

"I can't read the L.A. Times because the newsprint comes off on my hands," Lamb Chop said gravely. "It's one of the problems with being made out of a sock."