

The First Amahl

The Story of Chet R. Allen



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Preface

During the summer of 2025, I suffered from plantar fasciitis in my feet for weeks and weeks and could not walk without extreme pain. One evening, I decided to watch the short Christmas opera *Amahl and the Night Visitors* for inspiration. In the story, a crippled boy is healed at the mere thought of offering his crutch as a gift to the Christ Child.

While watching the heartfelt opera and hearing its tuneful melodies once again, it dawned on me that the year 2026 would mark the 75th anniversary of the opera's debut on NBC in 1951.

I had become curious in recent years about the real-life story of the first boy to play and sing the role of Amahl. After all, Chet Allen was born in Chillicothe, Ohio, just 20 miles from my own hometown of Circleville. When I sang as a boy in the Circleville Boys Choir, I heard of the famous Columbus Boychoir School that had moved to New Jersey - and which later on became the American Boychoir.

Later, during the course of my 22-year directorship of the Cincinnati Boychoir, my choirs collaborated with the American Boychoir in two festivals, and I served as pianist with their director, James Litton, conducting the American

Choral Directors Association's first National Honor Boychoir performance at our convention in Washington, D.C. I still remember those 222 boys from nearly every state lining up on the steps outside the Capitol building for an impressive photograph.

I also prepared many a boy to sing the role of *Amahl* for productions by opera companies and churches.

The name of Chet Allen was known at that time mainly for his playing the part of Amahl in the first NBC broadcast of the opera, and for his untimely death at the age of 45. Sometimes I had wondered about the rest of his story in between those two events.

So, I began researching his life and soon learned that he had married and had a daughter. I searched for a few months and was fortunate to find her and seek out her approval to write about her father.

In honor of the 75th Anniversary of *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, and in gratitude for Chet Allen for his many contributions and gifts to the world, I am honored to present here a biographical sketch of his life, as shared in some of the many news articles about him and in person by his daughter Margaret and several of his living classmates and colleagues.

Early Life

Chet R. Allen was born on May 6, 1939, to parents Chester Graves Allen (1905-1992), and Ruth Davis Allen (1908-1987), in Chillicothe, Ohio. His father was a chemical engineer.

As a youth, the curly-haired boy enjoyed singing, drawing cartoons, collecting stamps, and playing football. He had a sister, Jill, who was six years younger.

After his parents moved to Columbus, Ohio, Chet was accepted into the Columbus Boychoir, a boarding choir school founded in 1937 in Columbus, Ohio, which moved to Princeton, New Jersey in 1950 upon receiving a donation of significant property from the Gerard Lambert Estate in Princeton.

The Columbus Boychoir School

The Columbus Boychoir became quite renowned for its beautiful sound. In 1980, the choir's name was changed to the American Boychoir. Concert tours to as many as 32 states on a single tour increased the visibility of the choir.

Many of the boys attending the Columbus Boychoir School grew up to become successful in their professions of choice, including music and the arts.

One of these extraordinary young men was Van Dyke Parks, a classmate of Chet, who said “I have great affection for Chet’s memorable contribution to the cultural and social affairs of American arts, and the frontier work he did.”

Mr. Parks became a songwriter, arranger, producer, and executive for Warner Brothers. He collaborated with Brian Wilson on song arrangements for the Beach Boys, arranged songs for Disney films such as *The Jungle Book*, and, as a boy, sang the role of Amahl himself. “I followed suit, like so many other boys who took the challenge - when I sang the role with Rosemary Kuhlmann and the New York City Opera Company in 1956.”

Chet worked with Van Dyke “on a television series called *Bonino*, with Ezio Pinza, on NBC. Chet and I played adopted brothers.” Pinza was a famous Italian operatic bass.

One of Chet’s roommates, John Stewart, mentioned that he, too, auditioned for the role of Amahl with Menotti, after Chet, and “was told yes, I could sing it, but was too tall.” Mr. Stewart became a famous operatic tenor and a distinguished

university professor of vocal activities at Washington University. Today, he teaches voice for advanced singers in New York City. John recounts as follows:

In June of 1950, I arrived at the Boychoir Camp in Chautauqua as a newbie camper. When the Boychoir had come to Alliance, Ohio, my hometown, I auditioned for Mr. Huffman, who was staying with us. He'd stood with my dad in the tenor section of the Westminster Choir in the early 30s, and then graduated with him in the first graduating class of the Choir College. As auditions go, it was pretty stress-free. After an invigorating and fun week, the Boychoir vets showed up. They were like gods, so self-assured, so talented. At dinner that first night, one sat down next to me and announced, "My handle's Chet Allen." That seemed to me the most fantastic thing anyone had ever said! I wanted to BE him but was totally intimidated. He seemed so comfortable with himself, easy and friendly without being in any way condescending.

In my subsequent years at CBS, I saw no reason ever to change my first impression of him as a person who represented the best of the Boychoir: confident, extremely gifted, absolutely without any arrogance,

somewhat introspective – there were depths to him that he kept to himself – always up for a game or other form of fun – yet somehow private. We roomed together in the cottage the year before *Amahl*.

I do remember – I should explain that I shared none of the above qualities – I was arrogant and defensive – a real wise guy. In fact, if you will, a short digression, when at the first big reunion in the 90s, Warren Elliot, a terrific football player, nurse and folk singer in adult life, explained why he used to beat me up. I might be reading a book, and he would ask what I was reading and my retort was “Nothing that could interest YOU.”

I remember that one time Chet got so angry with me that he chased me from the big house to the cottage. Honestly, I do not remember why, but the above story might suggest a motive.

Menotti heard Chet and cast him as the first Amahl. He’d been a soloist; beautifully audible, I believe, on those red vinyl LPs recorded before I arrived. Later when I sang for Menotti, he said “Yes, you can sing it but you’re too tall!” The first time in a long career to be “typed out.” But even among my dear pals who

subsequently sang the role with great effect, e.g., Billy McIver and many others, Chet was unique.

It's my great regret that I lost touch with Chet after he left the Boychoir – hey – I was a kid. I've often wondered if he made any attempt to continue singing, whether professionally or just for fun.

So, thank heaven for the great Chet Allen. I only wish he were still around to fill us in on what we don't know, living a long and happy life!

The Columbus Boychoir did begin to allow boys with changing voices to finish out the school year, keeping them involved with backstage duties. Howard N. Reeves notes:

Great recollections of Chet by John Stewart. Some I never recalled before, since I didn't begin my Boychoir experience until 1954. (I did, however, meet John at Chautauqua the summer before, during a rehearsal with the Chautauqua choir, which John's father conducted.) I was also interested in John's mention of boys whose voices changed. Mine did also, during my second year at CBS. While I was unable to sing with my Brothers during daily rehearsals, I managed to find work helping the

grounds keeper or painting scenery for the operettas. I was grateful to still be allowed to remain in school for the rest of the year.

After his boychoir days as a youth, Mr. Reeves sang in church choirs, continued piano and organ lessons, and joined in alumni performances, including a Christmas performance of *Amahl* as a shepherd. He recounts the development of his career as follows.

From this point on, my musical tastes turned more toward the pop genre. In college, I was the accompanist for a men's quartet that sang mostly standard show tunes. Then two of my fraternity brothers and I formed a folk-singing trio, performing at college and local functions, and spending the summer playing aboard a showboat on the Ohio River. The group also wrote songs and eventually recorded a record for ABC Paramount. Shortly after that, we morphed into a pop band and recorded for Scepter Records. We also became the backup band for singer B.J. Thomas ("Raindrops Keep Falling On My Head"), and I toured with him as his pianist and musical director for several years.

Later, I wrote and produced national and regional jingles before working for an advertising agency as a creative director. When I left there, I worked in video production as a writer/producer. I've since reconnected with my old music collaborator, and we are currently involved in music as songwriters.

Amahl and the Night Visitors

At age 12, Chet became the first boy to play the role of Amahl in the first opera composed specifically for television broadcast. Gian Carlo Menotti, a composer born in Italy, but who called himself an American composer throughout his life, was commissioned by NBC to compose a Christmas opera to be aired on December 24, 1951.

NBC commissioned the opera eighteen months before the broadcast. For some time, Menotti had difficulty determining the particular subject of the opera, until one day when he was walking through the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, where he happened to see the painting *The Adoration of the Magi* by Hieronymus Bosch. The depiction of the three kings at the manger scene inspired him to begin composing, but he finished only just in time, so that the singers received some parts of the final score just days before the performance.

The libretto describes the three kings who are following the star to the Christ Child in Bethlehem. They stop for an overnight stay at the house of Amahl, a crippled boy living with his poor mother. Amahl offers his crutch as a gift to be given to the child and is miraculously healed.

Menotti composed *Amahl and the Night Visitors* in one act, with his own English libretto. It was performed in New York City by the NBC Opera Theater, at NBC Studio 8H in Rockefeller Center, where it was broadcast live on television as the debut production of the Hallmark Hall of Fame.

Thomas Schippers conducted the orchestra. The 50-minute opera was supplemented by a verbal introduction by the composer, and the Columbus Boychoir singing Christmas carols afterwards to complete the hour-long broadcast. Thirty-five NBC affiliates across the country aired the broadcast to an estimated five million viewers.

The principal characters who performed in the original 1951 broadcast were as follows:

Amahl, boy soprano – Chet Allen

His Mother, mezzo-soprano - Rosemary Kuhlmann

King Kaspar, tenor - Andrew McKinley

King Melchior, baritone - David Aiken

King Balthazar, bass - Leon Lishner

The Page, bass - Francis Monachino

Chet Allen sang the role of Amahl again in April 1952 with the New York City Opera, with Thomas Schippers conducting again. Chet's voice changed before he would have sung it again in December for the second annual television performance on NBC.

Television broadcasts of the work continued for decades, and the popular opera is performed throughout the world to this day. Churches, community choirs, children's choirs, opera companies, theater companies, and universities have presented *Amahl* in live, streaming, radio and television performances. The opera is available from Wise Music Classical in Chinese, Dutch, English, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish, and it has been translated or adapted into dozens of other languages.

It is said that Chet's voice moved famous Italian conductor Arturo Toscanini to tears. Critics praised his angelic sound. John Stewart remembers Chet's singing in this way:

You all have seen the kinescope of the broadcast.
Chet was wonderful. Way beyond looking perfect, he

was a fine actor and a great singer. The voice was beautiful – warm and clear and even, and he was musical – his phrasing and dynamics were aspects that he just picked up though his great gifts. His relationship with Rosemary Kuhlman, the mother, was so touching, for example, comforting her (“Don’t cry, mother dear...”), and his straightforward, serious questioning of the kings, charming, and fighting to defend her (“Don’t you dare, ugly man, hurt my mother!”).

Other Movies and Television

Chet received a contract with Universal Studios, starting at \$1,000 a week, in 1952. He appeared in the film, *Meet Me at the Fair*, with Dan Dailey and Scatman Crothers. In the movie, Chet played the part of Tad Bayliss. He sang Schubert’s “Ave Maria” as a solo, “All God’s Chillun’ Got Shoes” with Crothers, and “I Was There” with Dailey and Crothers.

John Stewart mentions:

Chet went to Hollywood and made a movie with Dan Dailey, *Meet Me at the Fair*, displaying boyish joyfulness and fine singing (although I confess, I’ve

not seen it since the premier in Columbus). I do remember that Chet's voice had "changed" by the Columbus premiere, and what I'd like to insist is that his baritone voice was light and clear and lovely as he sang at both the premiere and the accompanying concert.

Meet Me at the Fair was initially known as *Great Companions*. The film, by Universal-International Studio, was distributed by Universal Pictures. Filming began in 1952, and the movie was released in January 1953. It was based on a short story called "The Great Companions," which was authored by Hollywood screenwriter and producer Gene Markey and published in *Ladies Home Journal* in October 1951.

Chet also appeared in the 1953 television series *Bonino* as Jerry, one of the sons of Bonino, who was played by Italian singer Ezio Pinza. His classmate from the Columbus Boychoir School, Van Dyke Parks, played alongside him as another of Bonino's sons, Andrew.

Chet also played the part of Slats in four episodes of the American television series *The Troubleshooters* from 1959-1960. The NBC series included 26 episodes.

Adult Life

Chet had jobs in a department store, and as an insurance agent, and he continued to sing in adult life.

He was an active member of First Community Church, 1320 Cambridge Boulevard, in Columbus, Ohio. In 1966, he performed the role of Melchior in a production of *Amahl and the Night Visitors* at the church. The cast included:

Amahl - Mark Erickson

His Mother - Jevne Kessel

Kasper - Norman Staiger

Melchior - Chet Allen

Balthazar - Richard Wilson

The Page - Frank Johnson

Chet married Marilyn Rose Lantz (1936-2019) at the church on August 28, 1965. They divorced on May 10, 1976. Their daughter Margaret Rose sang in the youth choir at the church from approximately 1985 to 1989. The Director of Academic Programs for the National Center for State Courts, today Margaret is a freelance pianist and sings in community choirs. Married to Carlos Hoyt, she has three children, Ben, Nina, and Izzy.

Struggles

Chet struggled with depression at many points throughout his life, and he died of an overdose of his antidepressant medication at the age of 45.

John Stewart recounts:

Could he have burned out, or even have been emotionally damaged, like Icarus flying too high and then falling? I believe that, despite his sadly early death, he had a happy adult life. His lovely daughter (his “spitting image!”) is witness to that.

In our generation, once our voices “broke” we were made to feel over and done with. I think of the great Jimmy Hangar who stayed on for a year – a wonderful kid who stopped singing when his voice changed. Could Jimmy, or any of the others, have been offered continued voice lessons or other support to help them to keep going?

A few years ago, shortly before he died, Menotti talked about Chet in a NY Times interview. He had offered Chet the role of Toby in *The Medium*. Interestingly, and as far as I’m concerned, damning, is

that he did not mention that Toby is a mute, a non-singing part.

We are all familiar with stories of child stars and virtuosi who burn out. Chet was a tough, self-possessed, extraordinarily gifted kid. Did he burn out? Or was his great success more of a burden to him, the kind of adulatory attention suddenly coming to a full stop? Or, more happily, he had a great time, loved it, and had had enough? Certainly nothing of his gift went away when his voice changed.

While thinking about this, I started remembering all my Boychoir pals who sang *Amahl*, each of you bringing something personal, original and wonderful to that great singing/acting opportunity. And I started thinking about all of us from the early 50s who did manage to go on in music - to name only a few: Metropolitan Opera tenor Doug Ahlstedt and tenor Guy (Rothfuss) Renard, countertenor/composer John Patrick Thomas, the unmatched multi-talent Van Dyke Parks. My classmate Bill Gross, who in his 80s, sounds better than most professional tenors. And Stephen Bryant, who still sounds strong and healthy.

Faith in God

Chet's daughter Margaret recounts that her father had a constant faith in God, regardless of the circumstances in life. Chet and his wife divorced after nearly eleven years of marriage, and yet every Friday he would come to see his daughter at her mother's house and visit with her after school. Margaret's mother would take her to see her father and her grandparents on holidays.

Although Chet received residential treatment from time to time, he was able to move into an apartment of his own during the last couple years of his life and to function on his own despite his disability.

When the general public today learns of well-known child actors who leave the profession, oftentimes leaders in the media are quick to speculate about what went "wrong." But perhaps the assumption that all children - indeed all people - would like to become actors, or to garner fame - is a false one in the first place. Perhaps this point of view typically emanates from the person who works in the media and hopes to create a fine human-interest story by elevating certain persons to a higher status, even if unintentional. Perhaps the practice of searching for inspirational role models in everyday life can lead to the idolization of others, and in the particular

case of our young people, set them on a pedestal that no human was ever meant to be set upon.

Chet Allen was a son, a brother, a husband, and a father. First and foremost, he was a child of God, one who helped bring to the world an immeasurable gift of music and hope.

Chet Allen died on June 17, 1984. His burial took place at Riverside Cemetery in Mifflin Township, near Columbus, Ohio.



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