

THE

Nick Zegarac's

Hollywood

ART

THE
Esther Williams

EDITION

Saying goodbye to
Esther
WILLIAMS

"I'm really lost about Esther Williams' work in the movies. But if nothing else they had to be terribly dangerous."

– Time Magazine review for **Million Dollar Mermaid** (1952)

On June 6, 2013 America lost its beloved mermaid, not perhaps such an earth-shattering event to those who only knew Esther Williams by the movies she made. Many were, in fact, forgettable fluff; the entire premise behind their wafter-thin 'boy meets girl' plot dedicated to finding unique ways of getting Esther into a skin-tight one piece at least a couple of times before the final fade out.

Only now that 'fade out' is truly final, and with it goes one of yet unassuming great ladies the movies have ever known. Esther terms. She was more honest about her place in history, cinematic or of the tributes immensely. She was a woman who liked to laugh, at and through adversity; but especially when times were grand. She suspect she'll forever be remembered for the iconography MGM it's fitting. Arguably, no one looked more ravishing in a one piece.

She starred and swam in her aquacade movies, frequently while easy as it looks. And she made light of her hardships, even when they the image of a devil-may-care just out on a lark. Grace under fire isn't Hollywood stars these days, or elsewhere in the world for that matter,

Perhaps this was the secret to her longevity. She lived to 91. But her dangerous when wet, with the thrill of a romance, and this time - for keeps. After all, it's probably the reason Esther Williams is so beloved. But she ought to be remembered for other qualities too: for her gregarious sense of humor, for her ebullient sense of self and her compassionate approach toward others. Because, in the end, Esther Williams never took anything for granted. She just took it all in stride.



the sassiest, brassiest, funniest, most charming, probably wouldn't think of herself in those otherwise. But she would have enjoyed all herself – primarily, at life in general, also knew how to tell a good story. I imposed on her – and in a way

pregnant. Try it sometime. It isn't as infrequently threatened to dismantle a highly prized commodity among but Esther had it in spades.

memory is likely to live on a lot longer; After all, it's probably the reason Esther Williams is so beloved. But she ought to be remembered for other qualities too: for her gregarious sense of humor, for her ebullient sense of self and her compassionate approach toward others. Because, in the end, Esther Williams never took anything for granted. She just took it all in stride.

– **Nick Zegarac**



WAVE MAKER OF HOLLYWOOD

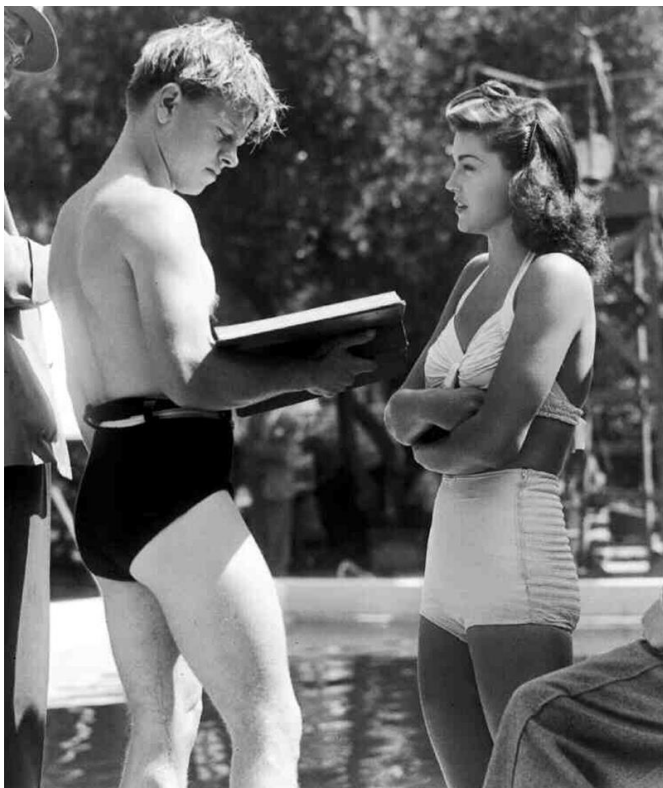
If she were still around, Esther Williams would be among the first to admit that any snap analysis of her career as a serious actress is 'all wet.' *"All they ever did for me at MGM was change my leading man and the water in my pool."*



Although she was a ravishing beauty, seemingly flawless (at least on the surface) and groomed in the halcyon days of the star system, still waters ran very deep in both Esther's life and career. From the onset she had a pert frankness about herself and no nonsense, some might say, 'unvarnished' opinion of showbiz and Hollywood.

For example, she once described her first swimming job – opposite Johnny Weissmuller in Billy Rose's *Aquacade* as *"tacky"*, and after a talent scout from MGM offered her the chance at a movie audition, an audience with the great and powerful L.B. Mayer no less, Esther's curt reply of *"No thank you,"* stood for almost a year while she pursued another career as a sales girl for a local Los Angeles department store.

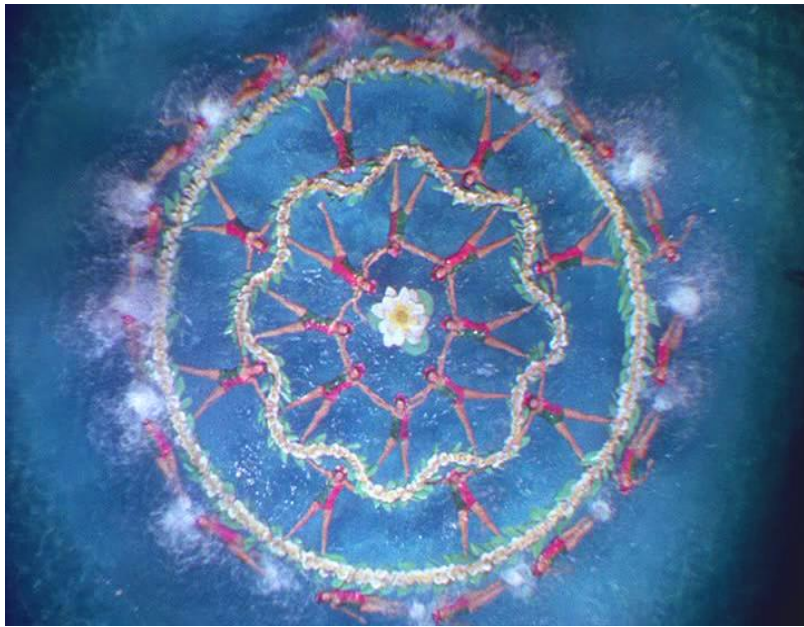
"But the one that said no is the one they had to have," Esther reasoned years later in an interview with Robert Osborne. The other sales girls at I. Magnin where Esther worked were utterly horrified at her abject refusal. And so, wearing a borrowed Chanel suit off the rack, Esther's Cinderella-like transformation from sales girl to movie star had its auspicious beginning.



"I remember when I first walked into Mayer's cavernous office...you had to walk fifty yards to get to him and in that time he could really study everything about you." With Esther, Mayer was undoubtedly impressed. At five feet, eight inches, she was both slender and statuesque – a muscular, attractive woman. If Mayer's initial reaction to making movies in a pool was tepid, his immediate response to Esther was anything but. Mayer offered her a contract at a hundred dollars a week on the spot. Reluctant, though accepting, Esther returned to the department store to inform her boss that she was quitting...and to return the Chanel.

Top: looking stunning a happy in 1944 the same year as her divorce from first husband Leonard Kovner. Only two years before she had had a little no nothing part in *Andy Hardy's Double Life* opposite Mickey Rooney (bottom). But then there were bigger parts in *A Guy Named Joe* (1943) and her first starring role in *Bathing Beauty* (1944), just the sort of escapist fluff wartime audiences couldn't resist. How could it miss? It didn't. Esther Williams had become a star!





"I always felt that if I did a movie it would be one movie," Esther admits, "I didn't see how they could make 26 swimming movies."

There is much to Esther's story that has remained quietly forgotten or happily buried for many years, though not because Esther herself has been secretive about her past. In fact, the opposite is true. Esther's open admission that, at the behest of Cary Grant, she attempted radical psychotherapy with LSD (then a legitimate prescription medication) to alleviate depression is but one of Esther's many no nonsense reflections.



When asked in the mid-seventies by a reporter to talk about her life, Esther directly replied, "Which Esther Williams do you want to hear about?" Indeed, by 1979, with her MGM career a part of her distant past (Esther's last swimming movie, **Jupiter's Darling** was in 1956), there were many other sides to the woman who had emerged from beyond the studio-sanctioned moniker of 'America's Mermaid.' In her prime, Williams was much more than simply a swimming star, movie star and the most popular post-war pin up of the 1950s. She had a knack for comedy, a yen for drama and the good sense to know what worked for her. She shot from the hip with clairvoyant precision; a gal with a solid sense of self, a razor sharp wit and a good head on her shoulders; a beauty who could withstand the waves as well as the wolves in Hollywood and manage herself both in and out of the water.

Previous page: anatomy of a mega hit. **Bathing Beauty** was Esther's first aquacade. MGM wasn't taking any chances with its new find. The film is a cavalcade of seasoned pros; expertly doing what they do best, with Esther feathered in for good measure and even better effect. Esther's ensemble herein included Xavier Cugat and his orchestra (top center), Latin tenor Carlos Ramirez (top right), band leader Harry James (middle left), character actor Donald Meek (middle with Red Skelton), popular organist, Ethel Smith (middle right), Ann Codee as ballet tutor, Mme. Zarka, nightclub singer, Helen Forrest (middle right), and even Sherlock Holmes himself, Basil Rathbone, herein cast as an unscrupulous agent.

Bathing Beauty's plot is conventional to a fault. Esther is retired swimming instructor, Caroline Brooks who has just married Tin Pan Alley song writer, Steven Elliot (Skelton) who has decided to retire. Since his agent George Adams (Rathbone) cannot have his moneymaker quit on him, he decides to wreck the marriage so that Steve will continue to work on his score. Instead, Steve hightails to Caroline's alma mater, an all-girl's campus whose charter actually allows for his attendance as a pupil.

The faculty tries their best to discourage Steve, but not until after he's won back Caroline does Steve agree to go. **Bathing Beauty's** finale – a lavish water ballet set precedence for the rest of Esther's career. The idea was nothing new, however. Busby Berkeley had already done an opulent water ballet for Warner Brother's **Footlight Parade** (1933). But **Bathing Beauty** had Esther and Technicolor to recommend it – an irresistible combo that audiences could not resist. The rest of Esther's tenure at MGM would be variations on the themes and formula established in this movie. Viewed today, **Bathing Beauty** remains pure sparkle and all magic.





Perhaps some of the credit for toughening up that resolve early on can be attributed to a little known screen test Esther did for **Somewhere I'll Find You**, a 1942 Clark Gable/Lana Turner melodrama. Esther had desperately wanted the part Turner eventually played. The undisputed 'king' of Hollywood was definitely an upgrade from co-star Mickey Rooney, whom Esther had just co-starred opposite in **Andy Hardy's Double Life** – a B-budget programmer in the popular MGM series. On the day of the screen test Esther had been told by flamboyant hairstylist, Sidney Guillaroff to 'go home'. "You're a nice girl..." Guillaroff reportedly told her, "They'll ruin you. Save yourself a lot of grief."



Undaunted, Esther hurried to the set, incredibly nervous that Gable wouldn't show to test opposite a bit player, then equally unnerved when he did with spouse, Carol Lombard watching from the wings. Reportedly, after planting a big wet kiss on Esther, Gable swaggered out before Esther could respond with her lines, turning nonchalantly to Lombard and muttering in his inimitable way, "Well baby, I told you I was gonna kiss me a mermaid today."



(Previous page): a spectacular overhead shot of swimmers presented in a kaleidoscopic pattern a la Busby Berkeley. Bottom: in one of **Bathing Beauty's** funniest sequences Steven Elliot (Red Skelton) must try to rid his fingers of the sticky wrapper from an errant candy bar under Mme. Zarka's watchful eye. He ditches it by inadvertently slapping his beloved (Williams) in the face.



This page (top): the first of many 'cute meets' with a frequent costar – Van Johnson. After **Bathing Beauty's** monumental success MGM ought to have spent more time crafting original material for Williams to star in. Instead they gave Esther **Easy to Wed** (1946) a tired remake of what had once been a charming romantic comedy, **Libeled Lady** (1936). Esther is cast as Connie Allenbury and Johnson as Bill Chandler, the newspaper editor desperate to have her lawsuit against him dropped. In this scene Bill has love on his mind, or at least deceit. Connie would prefer a game of marbles.

Retooling **Libeled Lady** as a musical didn't exactly come off as it should. Williams could not match Myrna Loy's iconic turn in the original film, while Lucille Ball, cast in the part as Johnson's long suffering fiancée, a role originally played with raunchy sass by the late Jean Harlow, was a complete bust. Worse, Dorothy Kingsley's screenplay seemed ill at ease in finding ways to insert production numbers into the mix; the film's biggest reuniting Esther with organist Ethel Smith and Johnson, crooning in Latin, *Bona Pixie* – a garish, but playful and rhythmic South American ditty.

Carlos Ramirez was also in it. Reusing sets and costumes from other MGM product, **Easy to Wed** had plenty of gloss but little sparkle and worse, no originality. It also did not feature Williams in a lavish water ballet – a misfire the public never forgave.



"I am still trying to comprehend what happened," Esther suggested years later, "Were they laughing at me? Was I a joke?" More fortitude was mustered for Esther's first confrontation with L.B. Mayer. Told she had won the coveted co-starring part opposite Gable, Williams graciously declined it, citing her brief tenure at the studio and her contract that prohibited her from appearing in a movie for the first nine months. She had barely been at Metro for three weeks. Mayer was not someone who tolerated being told what he could and could not do with his stars, who he regarded as his personal property. So Esther was read the riot act before Mayer's private secretary, Ida Koverman pulled a copy of her contract to prove to Mayer that she had been right about its stipulations.

Esther had no illusions about Hollywood in general or her own movie career in particular. Some would say she walked away from the movies. Yet Esther would be the first to admit to the fact that by 1956 movie musicals in general were waning in popularity with audiences. They had become a costly commodity to produce too.

Top: Esther was infinitely better served by two movies she made in the early 1950s; **Million Dollar Mermaid** (1952) and **Easy to Love** (1953). In the former, Esther was cast as real-life aquatic sensation Annette Kellerman in a largely fictionalized bio pic costarring Walter Pidgeon and Victor Mature, whom Esther glibly dubbed as *Victor 'Immature'*. The beefy matinee idol liked to have fun and Williams briefly indulged in an affair.

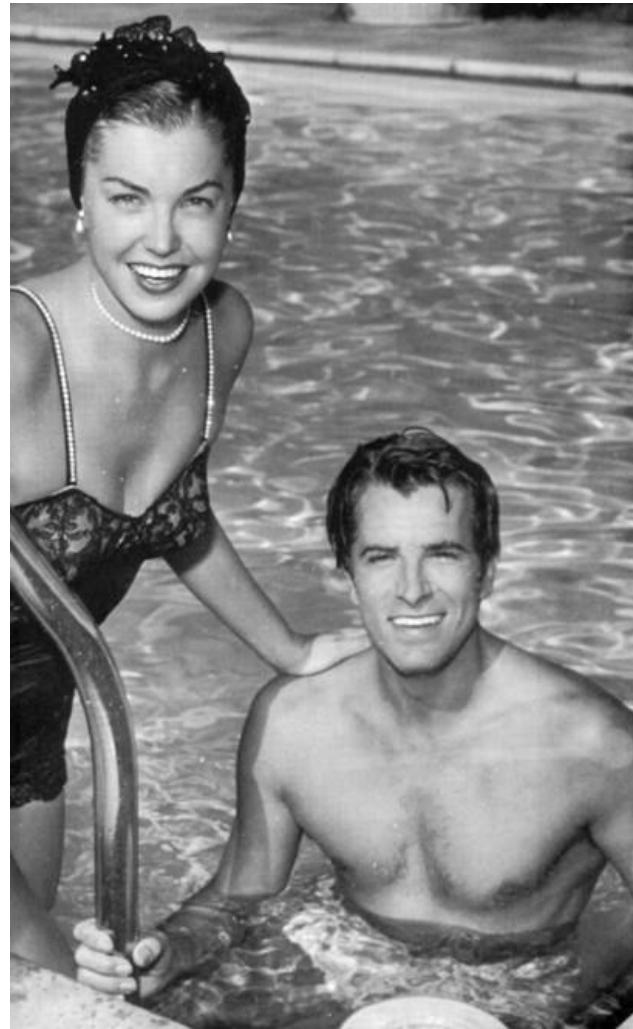
Given that the film's choreographer was Busby Berkeley, a man whose tenure had included some spectacular work including a water ballet over at Warner Bros. it remained something of a mystery that **Million Dollar Mermaid** featured only two rather lackluster aqua-ballets. In the first, (top left and center) Williams is briefly glimpsed in gold lame diving off a rising platform into the MGM tank. In the more intricate 'fountain and smoke' number Williams takes a tumble off a trapeze before diving into the center of yet another kaleidoscopic centerpiece. What set **Million Dollar Mermaid** apart was its superior melodrama – heartrending and poignant in spots.



(Above): Esther's track record for being married to the wrong guy was already 'o' for two by the time these photos were taken of her second sinking marriage to failed actor Ben Gage. It might have worked out if Gage, a relatively congenial and good-natured sort, also hadn't been such an awful sponge. By the time he and Esther parted company in 1959 he had squandered \$10 million of her hard-earned cash. At left, Esther seems genuinely bored with hubby number two, a feeling Gage all too willingly reciprocates as Esther prepares to cut their fourth wedding anniversary cake at far top right.

(Right): Fernando Lamas tried to seduce Esther during the making of **Dangerous When Wet** (1953). She kept him at bay for nearly sixteen years; then endured the tyranny of their turbulent romance for thirteen more. Esther dedicated her biography to her children *"who have endured the pain and the pleasure of my stardom"*. She rarely saw her own children during her marriage to Lamas at his request but consoled herself playing mother to his son, Lorenzo from Lamas' previous marriage to Arlene Dahl. Upon learning of Esther's passing Lorenzo commented, *"She was the best swim teacher and soul mom."*

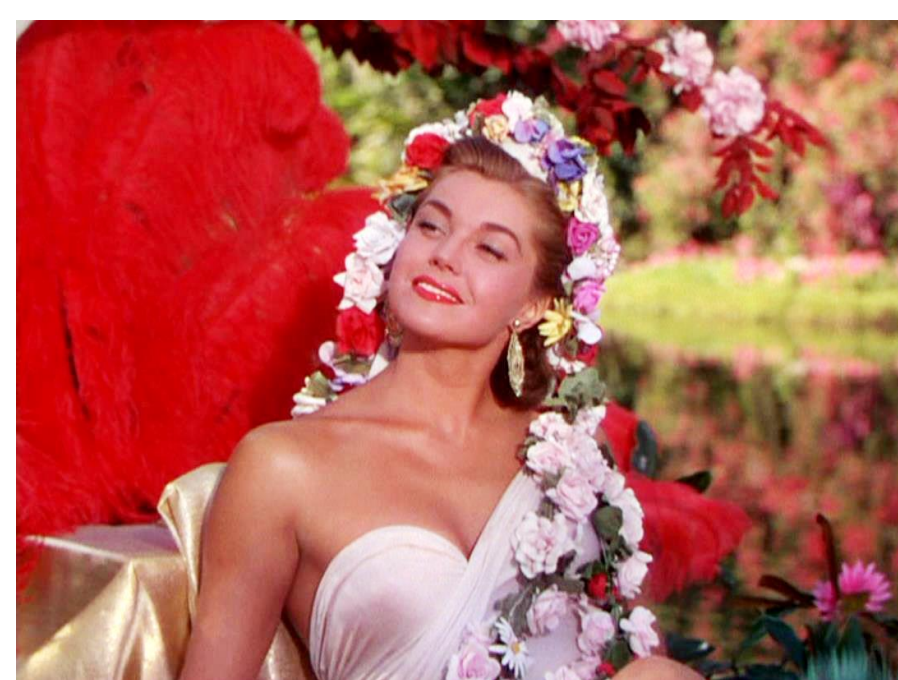
(Bottom): Esther and Fernando entertain Lana Turner at their table in 1952, the year Lamas costarred with Turner in the badly received remake of **The Merry Widow**. Given his professed love for Williams, Lamas certainly seems more than interested in Turner instead.



And Esther's lavish water spectacles had also begun to wear out their welcome; seeming 'old hat' rather than 'new-fangled' as they most certainly had been for a time after 1944, the year **Bathing Beauty** had its theatrical debut. Many today forget that **Bathing Beauty** was not Esther's movie debut. No, back then Hollywood didn't simply thrust a new talent before the cameras. They groomed individuals deemed 'rare finds' – giving them acting, singing and dancing lessons. Esther was a quick study. And while no one would ever suggest that her vocal styling could rival a Jane Powell or Judy Garland, she most definitely held her own opposite such attractive leading men as Ricardo Montalban, Howard Keel, Peter Lawford and Fernando Lamas, whom she would later marry.

"How the hell do you make movies in a pool," L.B. Mayer reportedly bellowed when the project was first proposed to him. *"The same way Zanuck does with Sonja Henie and ice skates,"* director George Sidney suggested. Indeed, finding ways to keep Esther wet yielded a decade's worth of creativity and profits. Yet Williams proved she didn't always need a tank of water to keep her audience interested. She was dynamite as the heart-sore love interest in **A Guy Named Joe** (1943), exercised a rare split second approach to comedy in **Easy to Wed** (1946) and **Take Me Out to the Ballgame** (1949), and even managed a convincing bit of melodrama in the gender-bending finale to **Fiesta** (1947).





Behind the scenes and back on dry land Esther embraced her role as mother that, unlike many in her profession, she found just as rewarding – if not more – than acting. When husband Fernando Lamas inquired whether she could stop ‘being’ Esther Williams, Esther simply hung up her bathing suit – at least publicly - and settled down. But she swam every day – for exercise and for the sheer joy of it. Yet there must have been some regret over the fact that she never achieved her girlhood dream of becoming an Olympic swimming star; the Olympics canceled after Adolph Hitler invaded Poland. But Esther was always a forward thinking gal. And in the absence of a sports career she had plenty else to occupy her time.



After the movies were officially ‘done’ with her, Esther made her small screen debut in 1960 in ‘**Esther Williams at Cypress Gardens**’; the most watched television special in its time slot – proving that the country’s fascination with her glamor and craft below the waterline had endured despite changing times and public tastes. A savvy business woman, Williams also attached her brand to a successful pool company and swimwear line. The branding of ‘Esther Williams’ kept her name alive. It also indirectly led to Williams being asked by ABC to become a spokeswoman and commentator for synchronized swimming at the 1984 Olympic Games.



(This page): **Easy to Love** (1953) has been called the quintessential Esther Williams musical, perhaps because it at once defined her on screen persona and put a definite period to her reign as America’s mermaid. Cast opposite Van Johnson once again, the movie’s plot had Esther torn between a trio of suitors that also included 50s beefcake John Bromfield and crooner, Tony Martin (top right); miscast as an oily lothario. **Easy to Love** featured Esther in an utterly spectacular 9 minute water-skiing finale staged by Busby Berkeley and filmed on location at Florida’s Cypress gardens, flanked by a small armada of speed boats and 68 water-skiing professionals. “*You’d better learn quickly,*” the film’s producer Joseph Pasternak told Esther, “*Because they won’t expect you to fall, so stay up or they’ll cut you to ribbons!*” Compounding matters was the fact that Esther was pregnant once again. Her marriage to Ben Gage was ending and so was her career. But what a send up it proved to be, skiing in and out of twenty foot geysers whose needle jets could have easily and fatally impaled her.





(Above): These overhead shots from the finale of **Easy to Love** illustrate a confident, zesty Esther. Behind the scenes she had her misgivings about the whole affair, particularly since water skiing stretched the back and diaphragm in unnatural ways. During one take Esther was forced to abandon her tow line when she suddenly realized Berkeley's boat, traveling at 35 mph, was a mere ten inches away from her skis. "I was running out of water to ski on," Williams would later recount, "There was a trough of water that looked like the Grand Canyon. If I caught the edge of the wake with my ski I'd fall into the propeller of the boat. I was shaking with anger because all Buzz cared about was the shot."

This was not Esther's first brush with danger. During the Kauai shoot for **Pagan Love Song** (1950) Esther had narrowly averted being run over by an outrigger. On **Million Dollar Mermaid** she had succumbed to 'the rapture' – her lungs collapsing while holding her breath for an underwater sequence. Mistaking her drowning for simple ineptitude director Mervyn LeRoy picked up his microphone and shouted through the underwater speaker system, "Esther, what the hell are you doing? We can't keep you in focus at the bottom of the pool. We're not lit for that!"



(Right): Not her best work, but adequate fluffy nonetheless, costarring opposite Johnnie Johnston in **This Time For Keeps** (1947). Johnston's career at MGM went nowhere fast. He had a good singing voice but absolutely zero screen presence. The same, of course, could never be said of co-star Jimmy Durante (who also appeared with Williams in **On An Island With You** 1949) whose inimitable brand of Brooklyn 'cha-cha-cha' was one of the film's infrequent blessings.

(Second from bottom): adjusting her accoutrements while an adoring Van Johnson looks on in **Thrill of a Romance** (1945); a turgid programmer costarring operatic tenor Lauritz Melchior and featuring Glenn Miller and his Orchestra. Good company, but an altogether placid movie. (Bottom): looking rather austere in toreador pants for the most curious Esther Williams movie of the lot: **Fiesta** (1947); playing one half of a set of twins, defending her brother's honor in the bull fighting ring in his stead. Ricardo Montalban played the other half, but the film was more memorable for his pas deux with leggy dancer Cyd Charisse than anything Esther did.



Of her three pragmatic divorces from husbands Leonard Kovner, Ben Gage and Fernando Lamas, Esther has since reassessed her "naïve expectations, misplaced trust, passionate love and need for a safe haven." The marriages did more than take Esther on an emotional roller coaster ride. They kept her pregnant, though hardly barefoot as the little woman. In fact, Esther worked almost without break while having her children; keeping her figure lean through vigorous exercise. "I don't know to this day how I managed to fit into those bathing suits when I was pregnant...diving off platforms with Ben (her first son) in **Neptune's Daughter**, going underwater in silver lame with Kim (her first daughter) in **Pagan Love Song** and learning how to water ski with Susie (daughter #2) in **Easy to Love**. Somehow I stayed a size ten through it all."



It couldn't have been easy, particularly since the men of Esther's boudoir were infrequently troublesome, emotionally unstable and occasionally self-destructing.

"Leonard was smart, handsome, dependable ... and dull. While my film career was beginning, a segment of my personal life was ending. I found, much to my relief, that all I needed for my emotional and personal security was my own resolve and determination. I didn't need a marriage and a ring. I had come to realize all too quickly that Leonard Kovner was not a man I could ever really love. Ben was into fun...boyish, almost puppy-like, and exactly what I needed after all of Leonard's





The formula wears thin (above): listening to Ricardo Montalban croon 'My Heart Beats Faster' from **Neptune's Daughter** (1949); a transparent little nothing desperately attempting to recapture the magic of **Bathing Beauty** (1944). Esther played Eve Barrett; a successful designer of women's bathing suits in a sort of 'art imitating life' scenario. Behind the scenes the entrepreneurial spirit had already hit. Esther had attached her name to a manufacturer of above-ground swimming pools and would later commit herself to the garment industry.

Neptune's Daughter also co-starred Red Skelton in a thankless role as lovelorn suitor Jack Spratt, who doesn't have a chance with the divine Ms. Barrett but just might get eaten alive by her man-crazy sister, Betty (Betty Garrett). The film's flashback and narration device, with Keenan Wynn (right) serving as Eve's ever-devoted press agent and MC was awkward at best. Today, **Neptune's Daughter** is known primarily for the debut of the Oscar-winning song, 'Baby It's Cold Outside' – sung by all the principals. It's also been notoriously criticized for an over-the-top riverboat finale (top middle). Incidentally, when MGM hosted its 25th Anniversary luncheon, the now world-famous gathering of star talent, the riverboat set served as the grand entrance to the dining area – the pool drained and lined with row on row of some of the most popular names in the industry; everyone from Mario Lanza to Lassie.



(Middle right and bottom): thinner still – costarring with Peter Lawford and Jimmy Durante in **On An Island With You** (1948), a thoroughly forgettable film in which Esther is a movie star in love with Lawford's brave pilot but engaged to co-star Ricardo Montalban, who – of course – is more interested in bit player Cyd Charisse.

darkness. But even though I had a lucrative MGM contract my husband was drinking and gambling my money away faster than I could make it."

Fernando Lamas – the most high-profile of Esther's husbands, who had been the great 'Latin lover' at MGM for a brief tenure in the 1950s, in fact, had proposed to Williams on the set of **Dangerous When Wet** in 1953. Realizing his penchant for carousing with starlets had yet to cool Esther reportedly told him 'It's no good' and meant what she said. It would be sixteen years before she changed her mind. But in retrospect it was a big mistake.



Lamas, who could be both demonstrative, yet consumed by jealousy, all but forbade Esther to see her children with any frequency during their marriage that lasted from 1969 to 1982. Instead Williams dutifully played mother to Lamas' own son, Lorenzo from his previous marriage to actress Arlene Dahl. But when Lamas died of pancreatic cancer in 1982 Williams became more relaxed and frank in her reflections on their relationship. *"Marriage to Fernando offered shelter and security. But the shackle was the price I paid. Once I married Fernando I became invisible. I had absolutely no idea just how cruel he would be about my children. The truth is that it was terrible beyond my worst fears. Fernando didn't like them, and they didn't like him. As you can see, widowhood has done nothing to curb my smart mouth. So much for diplomacy!"*



Then, after some convincing Esther married for a fourth time in 1994; this time to French literature professor Edward Bell, *"...a partnership which has expanded and opened my life in more ways than I knew were possible. Besides, I always took it for granted that there would be a life for me after Hollywood. And wisdom acquired through the passage of time is, after all, useless, unless you share it."*





“Wet she’s a star. Dry, she’s just a nice girl who should settle down and have babies.”

– Fanny Brice on Esther Williams

Born in Los Angeles on August 8, 1922, Esther Williams grew up with an innate love of the water fostered by frequent visits to her local playground pool and beaches. By age 16 she had already racked up three national swimming championships. Although she qualified for the 1940 Olympics, the encroachment of World War II forced a cancellation of the games and with it, Esther’s hopes for international fame as a professional swimmer. Cheesecake photos taken for local newspapers caught the eye of legendary showman Billy Rose who co-starred Esther with another hopeful, Johnny Weissmuller in his lavish San Francisco Aquacade.



Weissmuller was already trading in on his success as MGM’s Tarzan, and with Williams he proved mildly flirtatious, particularly during one of their aquacade routines. Esther has described the swim as mildly erotic; performing a backstroke while Weissmuller swam towards her, thereby suggesting that he might swim on top of her at some point. Each time the routine was performed Weissmuller would attempt to do just that with Esther doing her best to outrun him from one end of the pool to the other.



The overwhelming success of this spectacle was not lost on MGM executives and talent scouts who offered Esther a screen test. However, when scenarists approached MGM’s front offices with the concept of an entire film built around a swimmer L.B. Mayer was initially skeptical.



(Left top) Poster art for **Dangerous When Wet** (1953), a modest movie musical that introduced Williams to Fernando Lamas – a cute meet that in retrospect Esther would probably rather forget. Perhaps comedian Fanny Brice’s assessment of Esther was made before seeing what she looked like on dry land. Given the MGM glam-bam in these Technicolor stills from **Bathing Beauty**, **Thrill of a Romance** and **On An Island With You**, it’s easy to see that Esther had assets beyond her aquatic talents. (Middle left) Posing for pictures on the set of **Texas Carnival** (1951) with costar Howard Keel, who is unimpressed by the spectacle. (Middle right) On the beaches of Kauai in a sarong for **Pagan Love Song** (1950), the other movie that co-starred Keel. Keel and Esther never made much of a splash. Neither film ranks among Esther’s most fondly remembered. Bottom: regale in a truncated water ballet as part of MGM’s lavishly absurd **Ziegfeld Follies** (1945); splashy in Technicolor, morbidly dull in its execution.



Above: Ricardo Montalban and John Carroll hoist an exuberant Esther on their shoulders for this publicity photo taken for **Fiesta** (1947), Richard Thorpe's bizarre tale of sibling loyalty. Right: Howard Keel, barely recognizable under curly wig and fake beard plays Hannibal to Esther's Amytis in **Jupiter's Darling** (1955). The film was Esther's last for MGM and a real downer, its anti-war message becoming mired in the underwater ballet. It was also a consolation prize of sorts for Esther who had been on maternity leave, but had returned to the studio believing her next project would be **Athena** – a tale about an ethereal Grecian spirit reincarnated in the modern world to espouse the benefits of healthy living on an unsuspecting mortal. Esther had worked with screenwriter Dorothy Kingsley just prior to getting pregnant on the concept for the movie. In her absence the project was reassigned by Dore Schary, who had replaced L.B. Mayer as head of the studio in 1951. Worse, the part had been heavily rewritten for Jane Powell and bore no earthly resemblance to the project as original begun. *"In the old days Mayer would never have dared,"* Esther later mused, *"But Dore simply looked me in the eye and said, 'We have a studio to run'...and run it he did – right into the ground."* Esther did **Jupiter's Darling**, but her heart wasn't in it – at least not the dramatic sequences, and the absurdity of the screenplay had her requisitioning Hannibal to paint a herd of elephants in a bright multitude of colors, presumably because her Amytis did not care for gray!

At the time of its release **Bathing Beauty** was both a colossal critical and commercial success – second only in box office returns to 1944's reissue of **Gone With The Wind**. However, contrary to popular rumor, it was not the first time a poolside spectacle had been attempted for the movies. That accolade falls first to Samuel Goldwyn's **The Kid From Spain** (1932), and then Warner Brothers **Footlight Parade** (1933); the latter featuring a chipmunk-faced Ruby Keeler staying afloat amidst a small army of bathing beauties. The irony of having Williams' water ballets staged by the same man responsible for this aforementioned spectacle – Busby Berkeley – was not lost on L.B. Mayer who, though a gambling man, always believed in hedging his bets.

Bathing Beauty did feature the first 'water ballet' in Technicolor; a splashy sequence involving fountains and fire. Esther was serenaded by not one, but two of the biggest bands of the swing era; Harry James and His Music Makers and Xavier Cugat and His Orchestra. Its overwhelming success launched Esther's career. It also made her the number one pin-up girl in the country and the most popular entertainer among film exhibitors for nearly two decades. Immediately following the movie's triumphant premiere Esther became privy to an unflattering backstage truth about Hollywood that, in retrospect, she confesses she knew absolutely nothing about – the proverbial 'casting couch'.

"Dear Ida Koverman (L.B. Mayer's secretary) felt obliged to tell me that the real reason I'd been brought to the studio was to sleep with (Sam) Katz," Esther later explained. Katz, a middle-age paunchy producer/agent with a list of conquests that could make even the likes of rocker Jean Simmons blush, had finagled a \$50,000 signing bonus for Esther as a 'goodwill gesture', *"One more piece of his campaign to convince me that he was not that old and not that short, especially if we were both horizontal."* Instead Esther skipped out on Katz's intimate lunches and began talking about him reverently as a 'father-figure'. This, it seems, effectively killed the mood for Katz, whose reputation at the studio had already begun to lean toward laughing stock. Hence, when Katz eventually left MGM a few years later amidst a flurry of rumors – most deserved – he





Above: posing for publicity (left) on the set of **Texas Carnival** and (right) with costars (from left) Jules Munshin, Betty Garrett, Frank Sinatra and Gene Kelly for **Take Me Out To The Ball Game** (1949); the least successful of the Kelly/Sinatra pairings. Esther only briefly appears doing laps around a hotel pool as Sinatra croons *'She's The Right Girl For Me'*. The atmosphere on set was hardly pleasant. Kelly had wanted Judy Garland or Kathryn Grayson as his co-star, but was assigned Esther by Mayer and forever after let it be known that he thought her a lousy third choice for the part. Kelly was also getting tougher on his longtime collaborator, Stanley Donen, who would eventually break away to forge a lucrative career as a choreographer and director on his own. The two frequently quarreled. Finally, Sinatra was utterly fed up always being cast as the anemic and mousy 'before' image of the all-American male pitted against Kelly's robust, virile and spritely 'after'. *"Frank, they're not going to let you go,"* Esther told Sinatra, *"You have too much talent."* So did Judy," Sinatra begrudgingly replied, *"Tell that to the kid from the yellow-brick road!"*

nevertheless decided to set the record straight where Esther was concerned, telling Mayer, *"That lady's not only chlorinated...she's clean!"*

Often overlooked throughout her career was the fact that as a performer Esther was far more diverse than that one note wonder concocted by the studio to sell tickets. True enough, her forte was swimming. But Esther was also a spirited and vivacious dancer, a convincing dramatic actress and one of the wittiest raconteurs, deftly able to handle romantic comedy. Nevertheless, at MGM, Esther was given few opportunities to dry off. The public's demand to see her hit the waves in lavish water ballets even necessitated the inclusion of a very brief swimming sequence in the otherwise period musical, **Take Me Out To The Ballgame** (1949).

The film was a starring vehicle for Gene Kelly, described by Esther as *"... nothing short of a tyrant behind the camera. As much as he resented the fact that I was not a dancer, he resented my height even more. There was no hiding that I was half a head taller than he was. I wore flat shoes and curved my spine so deeply it felt like I had scoliosis. In one scene we were supposed to sit on an old-fashioned loveseat. But just as we were about to say our lines, Kelly looked past me to Stanley Donen and said, 'This son of a bitch even sits tall!' So I said, 'Gene...I'm sorry that my physique doesn't fit in with your plans. I can't make myself five foot two anymore than I can you six foot three. It would help if you sat up straight. If that's not enough try tucking one foot under your ass!"*

Initially, **Take Me Out The The Ballgame** was to have included yet another lavish water ballet, created by Busby Berkeley and inserted as a dream sequence. Whether from spite or jealousy, Kelly vetoed this idea in favor of *'Baby Doll'* – a reprise of a vintage 1911 song he warbles to Esther while she pretended to be a marionette (the puppet master with more box office clout that Esther all too willing to pull the strings). The staging of the number was awkward at best and thankfully



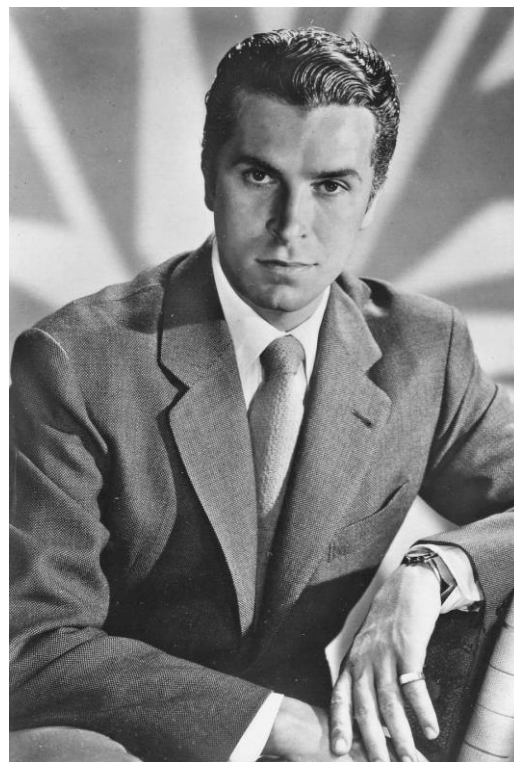
This page: Fernando Lamas – dangerous when wet...or dry. “I knew he had the power to disrupt the hell out of my routines,” Esther explained, “He certainly did that during *‘Dangerous When Wet’* (1953) when he offered me his crotch as a hand warmer on the ride back to the studio.” Sixteen years later their reunion on the set of *Esther Williams At Cypress Gardens* TV special, and Lamas was visibly thinner, confessing that he was coming off a nervous breakdown after his split from wife Arlene Dahl. After the briefest of badinage Lamas had Esther in the throes of passion; a spirited all-nighter that kicked off an affair Esther would ultimately live to regret.

Above left: serenading Esther aboard ship with *‘In My Wildest Dreams’*. Above middle: appropriately reincarnated as an octopus for the film’s dream sequence. Above right: singing *‘Ain’t Nature Grand’*...the things she plans. There was nothing natural about Lamas desire to control their relationship. He had tried as much with co-star Lana Turner (right) seen here from their failed remake of *The Merry Widow* (1952). But Turner was too much for Lamas, or so it seems. She enjoyed him as a passing fancy, but that was all.



Right: an imperious looking Lamas in this MGM studio portrait circa 1952, perhaps desperate to mask the inner demons of his youth in Buenos Aires. Fernando confessed to Esther that his maternal grandmother had forced him to view the exhumation of both his parents as a boy; the hideous vision of their skeletal remains haunted him even as an adult. “He once told me that he could be talking to someone at a cocktail party when suddenly the skeleton inside that person’s head was all he could see. These gruesome X-ray images never went away. He just got used to them.”

Bottom: Lamas takes Esther on a tour of Buenos Aires. “I was no stranger to childhood wounds,” Esther later confessed, “I thought it would be exciting to be with someone who was that handsome, that interesting, and who had troubles I felt I could deal with. At some level ‘trouble’ had a hold on me. I was attracted to difficult men, knowing deep in my heart that there was always a price to pay.”



never made it into the final cut – though the number survives today and has been infrequently glimpsed as an outtake at various film revivals.

By 1950, Esther had been christened *America’s Mermaid*. Capitalizing on that moniker, MGM exploited her to spectacular effect in the loose biopic of Australian swimming sensation Annette Kellerman: *Million Dollar Mermaid* (1950). Apart from its fresh and original *‘Smoke and Fountain’* sequence staged once again by Berkeley, the film also presented Esther with her first real brush with death on the set.

To date, every one of Esther’s underwater sequences had been meticulously pre-planned and storyboarded to allow Esther ample time to dive below surface, hit her mark and then come up for air. However, at the behest of Williams, the sequences in *Million Dollar Mermaid* were stacked together, occasionally two or three at a time so that she would hold her breath for increasingly longer intervals. During one of these stacked sequences, Williams discovered what divers refer to as ‘the rapture’ – a sudden compression of the lung tissue that does not allow for more air to enter its passage ways.

Filming Esther through one of the many underwater portholes in the saucer pool, director Mervyn LeRoy and his staff were unaware that Williams was, in effect, drowning before their very eyes until she lifelessly sank out of camera range to the





Above: Esther's awful taste in men continues. She had met Jeff Chandler in Rome after her divorce from Ben Gage. Chandler, billed as a rugged hunk with a distinguished head of tight curly gray, had pursued Esther relentlessly and eventually the two became lovers. But nothing could prepare Esther for the night she came into Chandler's bedroom, expecting to be seduced by this manly man, only to learn that Chandler was an avid cross-dresser, bedecked in full regalia and makeup, and with a closet full of expensive women's apparel. *"My head was spinning with questions,"* Esther later admitted, *"He blamed childhood influences...two angry women who made a little boy hate his own sex. 'Jeff' I said, 'You have a secret love life that doesn't include me at all – unless you count my lingerie. Do you know how ridiculous you look?'"* The affair ended right then and there. Three years later Chandler was dead from gross negligence during routine back surgery that caused him to hemorrhage.

Victor Mature was an entirely different matter; playful, fun-loving but without any sort of sense of propriety or commitment to anything or anyone. He just wanted a good time. Mature and Esther became lovers on the set of *Million Dollar Mermaid*. *"I felt a powerful attraction to Vic,"* Esther has said, *"I was married, but all the passion and most of the love in that marriage was gone. He was my first leading man who really lived up to the title and it's hard to stay away from a charismatic guy who's constantly whispering 'You're fantastic. I love you.' It might look better if I said Vic seduced me or I didn't know what I was doing. Nothing of the sort. I knew he wanted me. I wanted him."* The affair did not survive the premiere of the movie, although Mature was doting and ever-vigilant during Esther's six month hospital recovery after she broke three vertebrae in a terrible fall on the set.

bottom of the pool. Reportedly, even then LeRoy was unconvinced as to what was actually happening. But nothing could prepare Esther for the accident that nearly left her paralyzed for life. Hoisted fifty feet above the water tank on Stage 30 with a golden-colored aluminum crown affixed to her head, Esther dove into the water, snapping her neck and breaking three vertebrae, rendering her arms and shoulders utterly useless. Somehow she managed to tread water by kicking her feet until Flossie, her wardrobe lady, could run and get help. The accident left Esther in excruciating pain, and, in a full body cast for six months, plagued by headaches for the rest of her life. But she had narrowly averted becoming a quadriplegic.

On her next project, **Texas Carnival** (1952) Esther again encountered a near fatal calamity during the filming of a dream sequence. In it, she is seen as the ghostly apparition of Howard Keel's dreams, effortlessly floating in and out of his darkened bedroom in a white negligee. To achieve the effect, two identical bedroom sets were built – one on dry land, where Keel pretended to take his nap; the other inside a pool painted black with a black roof to sufficiently keep out the light. Unfortunately, the designers of this set left no space between its ceiling and the water line and only a small trap door that was virtually impossible to see once Esther had entered the set.

"I don't think you know the meaning of panic," Williams later mused, *"...until you're out of air and can't see any way out."*



Above: swimming with Johnny Weissmuller in Billy Rose's Aquacade, an experience Esther bluntly described as 'tacky'. Middle: cutting the mustard – as well as the cake – at 1953's Golden Globe awards; voted most popular female star opposite Alan Ladd, most popular male star. Right: giving an interview to the press in 1969 with Fernando Lamas. When news broke that Lamas was dying in 1981 the press surrounded the hospital and did everything they could to try and get a picture. Esther kept them at bay, allowing her husband to die with at least a modicum of dignity. *"They (the press) want it all,"* Esther later mused, *"The person they're interviewing really doesn't matter...only the story."*

Though she was still a top box office draw and would continue to make aquacade movies well into the mid-1950s, **Million Dollar Mermaid** was the final unqualified success in Esther's crown. By 1953's **Easy to Love**, changing audience tastes, dwindling box office receipts from musicals in general, the end of the star system, and, the infusion of television into popular culture had all conspired to undermine Esther's reputation as a saleable commodity. In a last ditch effort to resurrect the winning formula MGM thrust Esther into **Jupiter's Darling** (1955) an abysmally miscast mangling of history, revamped to suit the traditional lover's triangle; this time between Fabius (George Sanders) defender of Rome, his lover Amytis (Williams) and the venomous conqueror, Hannibal (Howard Keel). Opposed to the project from the start, Esther's rift with L.B. Mayer's replacement, Dore Schary reached a critical junction shortly before filming began.

"He (Schary) was very smooth, almost snide and very condescending, but in one way we were equal. I didn't respect the pictures he made (and he knew it) and he didn't respect the pictures I made (and I knew it)."

The film's critical and financial misfire effectively ended the studio's cycle of *'everybody into the pool'* that had made Esther Williams an overnight sensation a mere decade earlier. Although she infrequently attempted – and for the most part succeeded as a serious actress, first in 1956's **The Unguarded Moment** – an unremarkable 'who done it', and 1958's maudlin melodrama, **Raw Wind in Eden**, tepid box office response to both projects effectively killed off the remainder of her options. MGM unceremoniously dropped her contract. Worse, mismanagement of her estate by second husband Ben Gage had left Esther in a financial debacle. She owed money everywhere and to everyone, but chiefly, to the IRS.

A divorce from Gage in April of 1959 left Esther open to pursue romance elsewhere. Although she would have a few minor affairs – including actor Jeff Chandler, whose penchant for dressing up in women's clothes quickly ended their romance - for the most part, Esther embraced bachelorhood over the next decade. Eventually, she would wed her **Dangerous When Wet** co-star, Fernando Lamas on New Years Eve 1969.

As early as 1953, Lamas had pursued Esther romantically, though both were married to other people at the time. Lamas' insatiable penchant for running through starlets almost as quickly as they came under contract at the studio did much to cool Esther's initial interest in this Latin lothario. After her own failed marriages, Esther understood the importance of fidelity in a relationship and was convinced that Lamas could not live up to that expectation. Though the two would remain good friends throughout the 1950s, it was only after the years and hard living had begun to whittle away Lamas' good looks and affect his health that Esther finally agreed to marry him. With his own career finished Lamas was, as Esther later put it, *"safe now"* – a romantic has-been who would be faithful to her in marriage, if for no other reason, then he had become undesirable to the younger competition. Theirs would remain a lasting bond of matrimony until Lamas' death in 1982, though arguably, not a happy one.



Above: By the time Joan Crawford and Esther posed for these stills in 1953, Joan had already been labeled a Hollywood has-been. In fact, in 1941 MGM had promptly dumped Crawford after nearly 20 years as a solid money-maker for the studio. Undaunted, Joan moved to Warner Bros. where she not only made good on another two decades worth of films but also won an Oscar for **Mildred Pierce** (1943). In a weak moment MGM decided to woo back la Crawford for **Torch Song** (1953) a real hand-me-down with little if anything to recommend it other than Crawford's return on the back lot. One day, while Esther was preparing in her own dressing room, Crawford showed up unannounced to beg Esther to let her have director Chuck Walters help stage and choreograph her numbers in **Torch Song**. Crawford made it very clear to Esther that she also intended to 'have' Walters for more than his artistic vision; a curious fascination indeed since Walters was openly gay.

While there was little chance for a great romance between Crawford and Walters, the love affair between Esther and Crawford was definitely on after Esther agreed to give Walters over to the production of **Torch Song**. Regrettably, Esther decided to play a joke on Crawford after principle photography on **Torch Song** commenced. Because Crawford expected lavish gifts from her sycophantic entourage, Esther decided to present the diva with a half-empty bottle of vodka wrapped in toilet paper as a gag. "My gag gift was a chilling reminder that (Joan's) bubble wasn't real and she never forgave me for it. She didn't speak to me again – ever. Two weeks earlier I'd been the most wonderful person in the universe when I gave her my director. Now I was on her shit list for life!"

"It's a lonely business...this stardom," Esther would muse in her later years, *"...because you never really feel that it's safe to confide in anyone. Husbands don't want to know, even if they're not the source of the problem. Friends can't keep secrets. Even therapists were known to go to the press. You learned not to trust anyone with your confidences and risk busting that pretty pink bubble the studio had constructed around you and your outwardly perfect personal life. The public desperately wanted to believe that you lived a fairy tale...a projection of all their romantic fantasies, so much so that despite everything, you tried to believe it yourself."*

However, Esther proved that she had a head for enterprise. After MGM, she indulged in lucrative department store modeling and attached her name to a line of above-ground swimming pools. She also developed her own line of swimwear. At product launches, openings and benefits she was easily the star attraction.

"When I go to business conventions for my products, it sometimes takes me over four hours to sign all the autographs and pose for pictures. Everyone wants a photo for their store, and I never turn anyone down, no matter how long it takes."

Despite her considerable success post-MGM, one of Esther's most bitter divorces was from her old alma mater. After Dore Schary took over from L.B. Mayer in 1950, he made it known around the back lot that musicals in general and Esther Williams' musicals in particular were no longer a top priority. Thus, every subsequent green light given to one of her films was predicated on the level of success achieved by her previous effort. Worse, by Esther's accounts, Schary had stolen an original script idea for a musical project she wanted to make entitled **Athena**.

After delaying Esther's repeated attempts at getting the movie made, Schary turned around and had the script reworked to star actress Jane Powell instead. This artistic snub and subsequent wounded pride continued to fester for some time afterwards. Hence, when MGM released its compendium tribute to their great musicals from the past - **That's Entertainment!** (1974), showcasing snippets from many of Williams' best films Esther decided to sue the studio for their unauthorized usage. By 1994, the rift had healed sufficiently for the studio to extend an invitation to Esther to act as one of the narrators for **That's Entertainment Part 3**; an assignment she willingly accepted.

After Fernando Lamas' death in 1982, Esther Williams took a very brief hiatus from the limelight. Although she committed to a **Barbara Walters Special** and guest appearances on **The Dinah Shore Show**, perhaps the best snapshot of how Esther herself chose to handling her renewed popularity came from an unlikely confrontation with her local butcher. After waiting on her with great curiosity the butcher coolly inquired, *"Didn't you used to be Esther Williams?"*

"Yes. I 'used' to be," Esther replied coolly.

"What the hell happened to you?" the butcher continued, *"You've gotten older."*

To which Esther devilishly rebutted, *"Have you looked in the mirror lately? You've gotten older too!"*

(Top): a publicity photo taken in 1943, just as Esther's movie career was beginning to take off. (Middle): time passes. Legends do indeed pass their prime, even if that never alters the legend for the rest of us. In her later years, (with her **Take Me Out To The Ball Game** costar, Betty Garrett) Esther enjoyed her privacy mostly as well as the company of good friends, and of course her fourth husband, Edward Bell (middle right), *"as kind and loving a companion as I could have ever hoped for."*

She also had no illusions about age. *"Every age has its compensations,"* Esther admitted, *"You don't have to be the same from one decade to another. Everything changes. So you've got a few wrinkles...you're not only smarter but wiser. But the wisdom is useless unless you share it. Oddly enough, when I make an appearance now I'm told 'you look exactly the same!' The sweet myth that I haven't changed is something I don't argue with. I love the fact that I'm in a place in people's hearts that keeps me forever the same."*



SAYING FAREWELL... THOUGH NOT GOODBYE

In her autobiography Esther concludes, *“What the public expects and what is healthy for an individual are two very different things...I always took it for granted that there would be a life after Hollywood.”*

And so there has. Frank, funny and as vital as ever; Esther Williams endured the waning years of stardom as a top attraction on the interview, university lecture and talk show circuit. Her candid, self-effacing and unpretentious observations about Hollywood’s so called ‘golden age’ were a unique glimpse into that otherwise mythological paradise. Despite, or perhaps, because of the hardships along the way, Esther Williams in life had always emerged as something her on screen persona arguably never was; a truly great lady.

In 2007 she suffered a stroke that greatly impeded her mobility, though hardly her mind. It remained as bright as ever. But the stroke did take her out of the public spotlight, regrettably so and prematurely; a sort of self-imposed exile for a woman who had always been a very social creature. And now she’s left us for good.

Arguably, Esther Williams will never entirely leave the public consciousness, that iconography of ‘America’s Mermaid’ indestructible and perennially alluring. But I am already missing the woman; the gal who could dish the dirt about herself and the rest of Hollywood without ever being bitter about any of the roadblocks that had given her the double-edged sword of a truly great and memorable career, but a very bumpy road in life.

“I think the joy that showed through in my swimming movies comes from my lifelong love of the water,” Esther once admitted, *“No matter what I was doing, the best I felt all day was when I was swimming. Of course I still swim. Only now I go in when I have the pool to myself.”*

