

1951



TIME
LIFE



It was December 1951, and the pundits at *Billboard* magazine were looking back over the year in their annual attempt to spot trends and sum up the music they had heard. For 1951, they finally chose as their key word "trying"—to describe a year that was trying for the country, for the government and for popular music. The Korean War was still very much alive, despite the peace talks that had begun in July. At home, the Kefauver hearings in Congress were exposing organized crime, and UFOs were filling the skies over the West Coast. Television comedians such as Sid Caesar, Imogene Coca and Milton Berle—broadcasting live in black and white—sought to take people's minds off wartime shortages. In California, 40-year-old Ronald Reagan was winding up his term as president of the Screen Actors Guild, while in Memphis, 16-year-old Elvis Presley was going to a beauty shop to have his hair shaped into a ducktail cut like the one sported by film star Tony Curtis.

The popular music of 1951 offered more proof that the big-band era was really over. Indeed, the most prominent names in clubs and on jukeboxes were not veteran vocalists, but new artists who had come of age in an era of postwar singers. Vocal styles, which for years had been couched in the smooth manner of the big-band singers, suddenly erupted in a display of pyrotechnics that had everyone talking about "the age of the singer."

Some critics gave jazz credit for the new styles; "jazz, a music business genre which has been a questionable financial entity in the general music market, is rearing its head most conspicuously these days," reported *Billboard*. Jazz certainly influenced the duo that had two of the

year's top five hits. By the time Les Paul married California singer Mary Ford in 1948, he already enjoyed an enviable reputation as one of the country's best guitarists, having worked with the likes of Fred Waring, Bing Crosby and the Andrews Sisters. By the late 1940s he was busy experimenting with two of the most vital forms of musical technology, the electric guitar and multitracking, or overdubbing in the studio.

These elements jelled in 1951, when the duo's records sold some four million copies for Capitol. **How High the Moon** accounted for many of the sales. "That was the national anthem of the jazz world," recalled Paul. "It was the most accepted song in the jazz world, but no one could figure out a winning hit on it. So I went to work. I went to Indiana, to St. Louis, to anywhere, playing 'How High the Moon' three different ways; then I found this one way I liked the best. I brought it to Capitol, but they thought it wouldn't make it. I fought with them a year on it, and finally the president of the label came to me suggesting I release it."

Pop jazz also surfaced in Rosemary Clooney's first No. 1 hit, **Come On-a My House**, sparked by a driving harpsichord and the rhythm of jazz drummer Jo Jones. **Undecided**, by the Ames Brothers from Boston, was described by reviewers as a "specimen of pure big band swing with vocals" and used as its model the classic 1939 version by Chick Webb and Ella Fitzgerald. Yet another vocal tribute to the swing era was Doris Day's surprisingly salty **Shanghai**, co-authored by Milton D. Lugg, who later earned recognition as the leader of the *Tonight Show* orchestra. In addition, newcomers like Frankie

Laine and Jo Stafford borrowed heavily from jazz phrasing and inflection.

Jazz, however, wasn't the only vernacular music making an impact on the pop charts in 1951; other forms were also challenging Broadway and Tin Pan Alley for dominance over the pop scene, chief among them country and folk music. Producers such as Mitch Miller at Columbia became adept at taking proven country hits and recasting them in slicker formats, which he did when he brought honky-tonk singer Hank Williams' **Cold, Cold Heart** to Tony Bennett. "It was the first time a country record was kind of citified with strings and a big Percy Faith background," recalled Tony.

Detour had been written by Oklahoma steel guitar player Paul Westmoreland in 1945, and made into a hit by Western stars Foy Willing and Elton Britt before fellow Oklahoman Patti Page covered it in 1951. Using the same techniques of overdubbing that Les Paul had pioneered, Page, harmonizing with herself, made *Detour* her sixth million-selling record. Down in Nashville, an unassuming country ragtime piano player named Adelaide Hazelwood recorded a throwaway side for the small independent Tennessee label. **Down Yonder** was a 1921 vaudeville song known to country fans through a 1934 record by a Georgia string band with the unlikely name of the Skillet Lickers. This new version, though, was a romping piano solo, a surprise hit that actually set off a national fad for honky-tonk ragtime piano music, and caused Miss Hazelwood to win international acclaim as Del Wood.

Two songs from 1951 had such an infectious quality that they became sing-along favorites. One was Les Paul and Mary Ford's **Mockin' Bird Hill**, written in 1949 by veteran country tunesmith Vaughn Horton, who composed it during a train ride to see his ailing father. "Nobody would record it," said Horton, "so I got a band together and recorded it myself. Since then it's been recorded over 400 times." **On Top of Old Smoky**, by the era's best-known folk singers, the Weavers, was a genuine mountain lyric with a tune borrowed from an old music hall song called *The Little Mohee*. Pete Seeger, later regarded as the dean of America's folk singers, leads the group through Terry Gilkyson's arrangement.

teenage girls since the Sinatra craze in the 1940s.

The No. 1 song in 1951, both in terms of record sales and radio performance, was a seasoned tune in the hands of a seasoned performer: Nat "King" Cole's **Too Young**. Nat King Cole had been a jazz star for 10 years, but by 1950, hits like *Mona Lisa* had shown him that the road to commercial success lay in featuring his vocal talents in front of lush big-band arrangements like those of his friend Les Baxter.

Late in 1950 two veteran Broadway writers, Sid Lippman and Sylvia Dee, started working out a new song, one dealing with the then-novel theme of teenage love. Former Glenn Miller singer Johnny Desmond introduced *Too Young*, though songwriter Redd Evans thought it was better suited to Nat Cole's voice, and brought it to him. Cole agreed, and rushed into the Capitol studio on February 6, 1951, to cut it. By May it was on the bestseller charts, and by the end of the summer it was obvious that another standard had been born.

—Charles K. Wolfe



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Other top songs of 1951 had their origins even further from Tin Pan Alley and Broadway, reflecting a new internationalism of music publishing and recording. Tony Martin's **I Get Ideas**, for instance, started off as an Argentine tango called *Adios Muchachos*, published in 1929; it was fitted with English lyrics three times before Dorcas Cochran's 1951 words hit home with film star and singer Martin. Guy Mitchell's **My Heart Cries for You**, another auspicious debut by a singer, had been derived from *Chanson de Marie Antoinette*, supposedly written by France's 18th-century queen; Percy Faith, Columbia's ace conductor and arranger, adapted the music (under the pseudonym Mars) while veteran lyricist Carl Sigman provided the words.

Joining these hybrids was Mario Lanza's most famous song, **The Loveliest Night of the Year**, introduced in his motion picture *The Great Caruso* but based on *Sobre las olas*, a waltz by the 19th-century Mexican Indian composer and violinist Juventino Rosas. Perry Como's **II**, the fifth best selling record of the year, is an English music hall song from 1934.

As with almost every year, the music scene of 1951 saw its share of Cinderella stories: songs by gifted amateurs and unknowns who came from out of nowhere to find slots on every jukebox in the country. Churchill Kohlman was a watchman in a dry-cleaning shop in Pittsburgh when he wrote **Cry**. He had entered it in a song-writing contest there, but it lost out in the first round. However, another Kohlman song won the contest, and this encouraged the composer to keep pitching *Cry*. After Oregon singer Johnnie Ray, who had been bouncing around nightclubs since 1944, was discovered at the Flame in Detroit and signed to Columbia Records in 1951, producer Danny Kessler began searching for material. He came upon Kohlman's song, which he paired with *The Little White Cloud That Cried*. This not only resulted in a huge double-sided hit, but it set off the biggest furor in

Patti Page



DISCOGRAPHY

*Highest Billboard chart position

- 1. How High the Moon** Les Paul and Mary Ford • Music by Morgan Lewis, lyrics by Nancy Hamilton. Capitol 1451. Courtesy of Capitol Records, Inc. No. 1*
- 2. My Truly, Truly Fair** Guy Mitchell • Music and lyrics by Bob Merrill. Columbia 39415. No. 5*
- 3. In the Cool, Cool, Cool of the Evening** Bing Crosby with Jane Wyman • Music by Hoagy Carmichael, lyrics by Johnny Mercer. Decca 27678. Courtesy of MCA Records, Inc. No. 23*
- 4. Too Young** Nat King Cole • Music by Sid Lippman, lyrics by Sylva Dee. Capitol 1449. Courtesy of Capitol Records, Inc. No. 1*
- 5. Detour** Patti Page • Music and lyrics by Paul Westmoreland. Mercury 5682. Under license from PolyGram Special Projects, a Division of PolyGram Records, Inc. No. 12*
- 6. Be My Love** Mario Lanza • Music by Nicholas Brodsky, lyrics by Sammy Cahn. RCA Victor 1561. Courtesy of BMG Music. No. 1*
- 7. Come On-a My House** Rosemary Clooney • Music and lyrics by Ross Bagdasarian and William Saroyan. Columbia 39467. No. 1*

- 8. I Get Ideas** Tony Martin • Music by Lenny Sanders, English lyrics by Dorcas Cochran. RCA Victor 4141. Courtesy of BMG Music. No. 3*
- 9. Jezebel** Frankie Laine • Music and lyrics by Wayne Shanklin. Columbia 39367. No. 2*
- 10. Because of You** Tony Bennett • Music and lyrics by Arthur Hammerstein and Dudley Wilkinson. Columbia 39362. No. 1*
- 11. Down Yonder** Del Wood • Music by L. Wolfe Gilbert. Tennessee 775. Courtesy of Tennessee Record Co. No. 6*
- 12. Cry** Johnnie Ray • Music and lyrics by Churchill Kohlman. Okeh 6840. No. 1*
- 13. Undecided** The Ames Brothers • Music by Charles Shavers, lyrics by Sid Robin. Coral 60566. Courtesy of MCA Records, Inc. No. 6*
- 14. Mister and Mississippi** Patti Page • Music and lyrics by Irving Gordon. Mercury 5645. Under license from PolyGram Special Projects, a Division of PolyGram Records, Inc. No. 9*
- 15. The Loveliest Night of the Year** Mario Lanza • Music by Irving Aaronson, lyrics by Paul Francis Webster. RCA Victor 3300. Courtesy of BMG Music. No. 3*
- 16. My Heart Cries for You** Guy Mitchell • Music and lyrics by Carl Sigman and Percy Faith. Columbia 39067. No. 2*
- 17. Mockin' Bird Hill** Les Paul and Mary Ford • Music and lyrics by Vaughn Horton. Capitol 1373. Courtesy of Capitol Records, Inc. No. 3*
- 18. It's No Sin** Eddy Howard • Music by George Hoven, lyrics by Chester R. Shull. Mercury 5711. Under license from PolyGram Special Projects, a Division of PolyGram Records, Inc. No. 1*
- 19. Shrimp Boats** Jo Stafford • Music and lyrics by Paul Mason Howard and Paul Weston. Columbia 39581. Courtesy of Corinthian Records. No. 2*
- 20. If Perry Como** • Music by Tolchard Evans, lyrics by Robert Hargreaves and Stanley J. Damerell. RCA Victor 3997. Courtesy of BMG Music. No. 1*
- 21. On Top of Old Smoky** The Weavers • Music and lyrics by Pete Seeger. Decca 27515. Courtesy of MCA Records, Inc. No. 2*
- 22. Cold, Cold Heart** Tony Bennett • Music and lyrics by Hank Williams. Columbia 39449. No. 1*
- 23. (Why Did I Tell You I Was Going to)** Shanghai Doris Day • Music and lyrics by Bob Hilliard and Milton De Lugg. Columbia 39423. No. 9*
- 24. Charmaine** Mantovani • Music by Emo Rapee and Lew Pollack. London 1929. Under license from PolyGram Special Projects, a Division of PolyGram Records, Inc. No. 10*



Jo Stafford



Nat King Cole

1951

- 1 **How High the Moon** Les Paul and Mary Ford
- 2 **My Truly, Truly Fair** Guy Mitchell
- 3 **In the Cool, Cool, Cool of the Evening**
Bing Crosby with Jane Wyman
- 4 **Too Young** Nat King Cole
- 5 **Detour** Patti Page
- 6 **Be My Love** Mario Lanza
- 7 **Come On-a My House** Rosemary Clooney
- 8 **I Get Ideas** Tony Martin
- 9 **Jezebel** Frankie Laine
- 10 **Because of You** Tony Bennett
- 11 **Down Yonder** Del Wood
- 12 **Cry** Johnnie Ray
- 13 **Undecided** The Ames Brothers
- 14 **Mister and Mississippi** Patti Page
- 15 **The Loveliest Night of the Year**
Mario Lanza
- 16 **My Heart Cries for You** Guy Mitchell
- 17 **Mockin' Bird Hill** Les Paul and Mary Ford
- 18 **It's No Sin** Eddy Howard
- 19 **Shrimp Boats** Jo Stafford
- 20 **If** Perry Como
- 21 **On Top of Old Smoky** The Weavers
- 22 **Cold, Cold Heart** Tony Bennett
- 23 **(Why Did I Tell You I Was Going to)**
Shanghai Doris Day
- 24 **Charmaine** Mantovani



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