

# 1959



TIME  
LIFE  
MUSIC



*Connie Francis*

# 1959

Early in 1959 jazz critic Leonard Feather asked Dinah Washington to take a "blindfold test" for *downbeat* magazine. The jazz and blues vocalist was given no information about the artists and recordings she was asked to rate. Since Feather thought Washington herself had the makings of a pop singer, he asked her to comment on various pop vocals. The results were more candid than even he expected. About one, Washington said, "The only amends that can be made is to break the record!" About another: "Is that a singer or someone just kidding? It sounds like he had a mouthful of mush."

Such harsh standards were perhaps understandable. Dinah had been a star in her own musical sphere since she began singing with Lionel Hampton's band in 1943, and she had enjoyed more than 25 R & B hits since then. But by 1959 she was watching the success of fellow rhythm and blues veterans like the Platters and was wondering what it took to break out of what one friend called an "R & B cage."

A chance came a few weeks later when promoter Arnold Shaw, an old friend who now worked for the Edward B. Marks Corporation, brought to the A & R men at Mercury, Dinah's label, a song he felt was right for her. It was *What a Difference a Day Made*, and Shaw persuaded Mercury to let Dinah record it with orchestrations by Belford Hicks. At the session, Dinah changed the tense of the title to **What a Difference a Day Makes** and produced what Shaw considered a pop masterpiece.

The promoters at Mercury, however, continued to plug it only in rhythm and blues circles; it took Shaw's personal barnstorming tour to start the disc taking off with

wider audiences. On June 14 it entered the pop charts, and it was eventually honored as one of Billboard's Top 50 Hot Discs of 1959. *What a Difference* established Dinah as a mainstream star and allowed her to follow up with another smash that fall, **Unforgettable**, which had been popularized earlier by Nat King Cole.

Dinah Washington's crossover success in 1959 was no fluke; throughout the year, jazz musicians infused the pop scene with an invigorating variety of styles. Not since the big-band era had the two forms so productively merged. Jazz LPs proliferated, thousands of fans attended events like the Newport Jazz Festival, and television shows routinely spotlighted jazz artists.

Sarah Vaughan, a veteran of big bands led by Earl Hines and Billy Eckstine (and, like Dinah Washington, a longtime Mercury artist), had her first million seller with **Broken-Hearted Melody**. Della Reese, who had sung with gospel great Mahalia Jackson at the tender age of 13, broke out with her version of **Don't You Know**; the song was based on *Musetta's Waltz* by Giacomo Puccini (1896). It not only reached the top of the R & B charts but got to No. 2 on the pop side as well.

Two of the best-selling instrumentals of the year were taken directly from jazz. Chris Barber's **Petite Fleur (Little Flower)** was composed in 1952 by the New Orleans soprano saxophone player Sidney Bechet. (The title reflects the fact that Bechet spent much of his later life in France.) Barber was a leader in the British "trad" movement, which was devoted to reviving New Orleans jazz, and this record featured his clarinetist, Monty Sunshine, who was quite adept at imitating Bechet's style.

At the other end of the jazz spectrum was the modern "cool" style of Henry Mancini. His **Peter Gunn** was the musical theme for a hit detective show that debuted on NBC September 22, 1958; the program was one of the first to use jazz as background music, and its soundtrack LP brought lasting fame to composer-arranger (and Juilliard graduate) Mancini. Another of the year's top songs that began as an instrumental was **Misty**, which has been on the charts several times since Johnny Mathis made it a standard in 1959. Composer-pianist Erroll Garner introduced the song in 1954 as a piano piece, then had lyricist Johnny Burke add words to it in 1955. It established Garner as one of the most successful jazzmen of the age.

Some of the year's top songs were retreads from an earlier time fixed up with new arrangements. **Smoke Gets in Your Eyes**, which reached No. 1 in late January, had been performed by Irene Dunne and Fred Astaire in the 1935 film version of *Roberta*. It became the sixth huge hit for the Platters, whose manager, Buck Ram, specialized in adapting old standards to the '50s doo-wop style the group built around the strong lead singing of Tony Williams.

Bobby Darin's **Mack the Knife**, which roosted at No. 1 for two months, went back even further. It was originally the centerpiece of *The Threepenny Opera*, the 1928 German musical by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill. In 1952 Marc Blitzstein fitted the song with English words for an off-Broadway production of the play. Throughout the 1950s, *Mack the Knife* was a favorite with artists like Louis Armstrong, and it proved a natural for Darin's swinging, Sinatra-like talents. Just as natural, for Connie Francis, was the 1927 chestnut **Among My Souve-**

and then crossed the country on the strength of this recording.

Johnny Horton's **Battle of New Orleans** recounted Andrew Jackson's victory over the British in the War of 1812. It was penned by Ozarks folk singer Jimmy Driftwood, who came from a long line of genuine mountain fiddlers and balladeers. He took the tune from an old fiddle piece called *The Eighth of January*, which also celebrated the famous battle.

Almost as popular as these two ballads was Marty Robbins' **El Paso**, the Grammy-winning account of gunplay in the Old West. Robbins wrote the song in 1957 and begged his New York producer, Mitch Miller, to record it. Miller was nervous about its four-minute-plus length. "It's too long. The DJs will



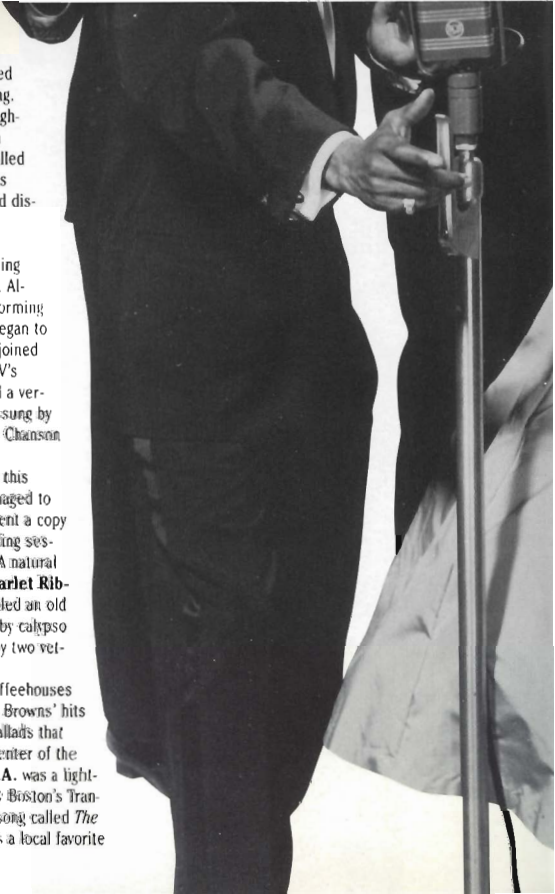
nirs. Since her 1958 success with *Who's Sorry Now*, Francis had specialized in refurbishing older standards.

Some of 1959's biggest hits also featured some of the decade's best harmony singing. From Olympia, Washington, came three high-school friends called the Fleetwoods with their No. 1 effort **Mr. Blue**. Originally called *Two Girls and a Guy*, the group changed its name at the suggestion of a Seattle record distributor, who took it from his telephone exchange.

Pine Bluff, Arkansas, produced the sibling trio of Jim Ed, Maxine and Bonnie Brown. Although Jim Ed and Maxine had been performing on country music radio since 1950, they began to reach a pop market in 1955 when Bonnie joined them and they became regulars on ABC-TV's *Ozark Jubilee*. One day in 1959 they heard a version of the French song *Les Trois Cloches* sung by a folk group called Les Compagnons de la Chanson under the title "The Jimmy Brown Song."

The Browns searched for the music by this name, but to no avail; finally a friend managed to track it down under the right name and sent a copy to the group just before their next recording session. The result was **The Three Bells**. A natural follow-up, released in November, was **Scarlet Ribbons (For Her Hair)**; though it resembled an old folk song and had already been recorded by calypso singer Harry Belafonte (in 1956), it was by two veteran New York songwriters.

The folk music revival sweeping the coffeehouses of the nation enhanced the appeal of the Browns' hits and nurtured three remarkable folklike ballads that rounded out the year's favorites. At the center of the revival was the Kingston Trio, whose **M.T.A.** was a light-hearted protest against a fare increase by Boston's Transit Authority. Modeled on a 19th-century song called *The Ship That Never Returned*, *M.T.A.* began as a local favorite



never play it," he said.

But in April 1959, while working in Nashville, Robbins was able to include the song in an album called *Gun-fighter Ballads and Trail Songs*. Robbins' Nashville producer was willing to try a single of *El Paso*, and he issued a special disc with the full song on one side and an edited three-minute version for DJs on the other. To the surprise of everyone (except Robbins), the DJs went for the full version and helped make it one of the longest singles to hit the charts.

—Charles K. Wolfe

The Platters



## DISCOGRAPHY

**1. Mack the Knife** Bobby Darin • Music by Kurt Weill, English lyrics by Marc Blitzstein. Atco 6147. Produced under license from Atlantic Recording Corp.

**2. Primrose Lane** Jerry Wallace • Music and lyrics by George Callender and Wayne Shanklin. Backup vocals by the Jewels. Challenge 59047. Courtesy of Masters International, Inc.

**3. Unforgettable** Dinah Washington • Music and lyrics by Irving Gordon. Mercury 71508. Under license from PolyGram Special Products, a Division of PolyGram Records, Inc.

**X 4. Scarlet Ribbons (For Her Hair)** The Browns • Music by Evelyn Danzig, lyrics by Jack Segal. RCA Victor 7614. Courtesy of BMG Music.

**5. Petite Fleur (Little Flower)** Chris Barber's Jazz Band • Music by Sidney Bechet. Laurie 3022. Courtesy of Laurie Records.

**6. Misty** Johnny Mathis • Music by Erroll Garner, lyrics by Johnny Burke. Columbia 41483.

**7. The Battle of New Orleans** Johnny Horton • Music and lyrics by Jimmy Driftwood. Columbia 41339.

**8. Don't You Know** Della Reese • Music and lyrics by Bobby Worth. Adapted from *Musetta's Waltz* from Puccini's opera *La Bohème*. RCA Victor 7591. Courtesy of BMG Music.

**9. Mr. Blue** The Fleetwoods • Music and lyrics by Dewayne Blackwell. Dolton 5. Courtesy of Capitol Records, Inc. Under license from CEMA Special Markets.

**10. Lonely Street** Andy Williams • Music and lyrics by Kenny Soudwer, W. S. Stevenson and Carl Belew. Cadence 1370.

**11. M.T.A.** The Kingston Trio • Music and lyrics by Jacqueline Steiner and Bess Hawes. Capitol 421. Courtesy of Capitol Records, Inc. Under license from CEMA Special Markets.

**12. The Big Hurt** Miss Toni Fisher • Music and lyrics by Wayne Shanklin. Signet 275. Courtesy of Janus Records.

**X 13. Peter Gunn Theme** Henry Mancini and His Orchestra • Music by Henry Mancini. RCA Victor 7460. Courtesy of BMG Music.

**14. Heartaches by the Number** Guy Mitchell • Music and lyrics by Harlan Howard. Columbia 41476.

**15. Among My Souvenirs** Connie Francis • Music by Horatio Nicholls, lyrics by Edgar Leslie. MGM 12841. Under license from PolyGram Special Products, a Division of PolyGram Records, Inc.



nicious, lyrics by Edgar Leslie. MGM 12041. Under license from PolyGram Special Products, a Division of PolyGram Records, Inc.

**16. He'll Have to Go** Jim Reeves • Music and lyrics by Joe Allison and Audrey Allison. RCA Victor 7643. Courtesy of BMG Music.

**17. The Three Bells** The Browns • Music by Jean Villard (Gilles). English lyrics by Bert Reisfeld. RCA Victor 7555. Courtesy of BMG Music.

**18. Smoke Gets in Your Eyes** The Platters • Music by Jerome Kern, lyrics by Otto Harbach. Mercury 71383. Under license from PolyGram Special Products, a Division of PolyGram Records, Inc.

**19. Broken-Hearted Melody** Sarah Vaughan • Music by Sherman Edwards, lyrics by Hal David. Mercury 71477. Under license from PolyGram Special Products, a Division of PolyGram Records, Inc.

**20. It's Just a Matter of Time** Brook Benton • Music and lyrics by Brook Benton, Belford Hendricks and Clyde Otis. Mercury 71394. Under license from PolyGram Special Products, a Division of PolyGram Records, Inc.

**21. Quiet Village** Martin Denny • Music by Les Baxter. Liberty 55162. Courtesy of Capitol Records, Inc. Under license from CEMA Special Markets.

**22. What a Difference a Day Makes** Dinah Washington • Music by Maria Grever, English lyrics by Stanley Adams. Mercury 71435. Under license from PolyGram Special Products, a Division of PolyGram Records, Inc.

**23. The Hawaiian Wedding Song** Andy Williams • Music by Charles E. King, lyrics by Al Hoffman and Dick Manning. Cadence 1358.

**24. El Paso** Marty Robbins • Music and lyrics by Marty Robbins. Columbia 41511.

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- 1 **Mack the Knife** Bobby Darin
- 2 **Primrose Lane** Jerry Wallace
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- 5 **Petite Fleur (Little Flower)**  
Chris Barber's Jazz Band
- 6 **Misty** Johnny Mathis
- 7 **The Battle of New Orleans** Johnny Horton
- 8 **Don't You Know** Della Reese
- 9 **Mr. Blue** The Fleetwoods
- 10 **Lonely Street** Andy Williams
- 11 **M.T.A.** The Kingston Trio
- 12 **The Big Hurt** Miss Toni Fisher
- 13 **Peter Gunn Theme**  
Henry Mancini and His Orchestra
- 14 **Heartaches by the Number** Guy Mitchell
- 15 **Among My Souvenirs** Connie Francis
- 16 **He'll Have to Go** Jim Reeves
- 17 **The Three Bells** The Browns
- 18 **Smoke Gets in Your Eyes** The Platters
- 19 **Broken-Hearted Melody** Sarah Vaughan
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- 21 **Quiet Village** Martin Denny
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Dinah Washington
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- 24 **El Paso** Marty Robbins



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