

# THE MID-'50s



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*The Crew-Cuts*



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In some ways, Jack Fulton was an unlikely hero for the pop music scene in the mid-1950s. In an age when young rock 'n' rollers were starting to dominate the charts, Fulton was over 50. A native of Philipsburg, Pennsylvania, he had played trombone in Paul Whiteman's great band of the 1920s, which included Bing Crosby and cornetist Bix Beiderbecke. For more than 20 years he had been a staff musician for CBS before he began to write songs with a Chicago piano teacher named Lois Steele.

Though the team would later produce hits like *Ivory Tower*, in 1954 their first giant success was a lilting song for Perry Como called **Wanted**. Framed by the lush studio sound of Hugo Winterhalter's Orchestra and Chorus, the song not only won Como his 11th gold record, it also nestled at the No. 1 position in *Billboard's* annual chart for the most played disc-jockey and jukebox record.

During these years, it seemed anything Perry Como touched turned to gold. Enconced in his weekly television show (for CBS from 1950 to 1955, then for NBC), Como by 1956 was turning out a hit record every two months. After winning initial fame as a relaxed ballad singer, Como showed his versatility by trying a wide range of material, from the country-flavored **Say You're Mine Again** (accompanied by a small group called the Ramblers) to the big-band jive of **Glendora**. Centered in New York, surrounded by veteran musicians and arrangers, serviced by the best in Tin Pan Alley and recorded by one of the country's leading labels, Como was the epitome of '50s pop.

The complex musical system that supported Como and others like him was reaching its zenith in the mid-'50s. It included song publishers and pluggers, radio and television

connections, a huge battery of talented studio arrangers and musicians, and a sophisticated merchandising and marketing network. It could reach into the past and refurbish old tunes that had been forgotten, and it could reach overseas to domesticate songs that were popular in Germany, France or England.

This system could take selections from specialized fields of vernacular music, like country, gospel, or rhythm and blues, and produce cover versions designed to appeal to a much broader audience. It could pull songs from the Broadway stage, from Hollywood films, even from television shows. It was a marvelous hit-making machine, and although by the late 1950s its power would be challenged, from 1953 to 1956 it reigned supreme and produced dozens of memorable performances.

A spectacular example of how things worked was Dean Martin's first major success, **That's Amore**. Known for his work in movies with Jerry Lewis and dubbed "the Crooning Comic" by the press, Martin had introduced the song in the Paramount film *The Caddy*. Capitol released the record on September 14, 1953, and Martin sang it on TV's *Colgate Comedy Hour* and the annual muscular dystrophy telethon that fall.

By December, the Capitol warehouse was receiving orders for over 70,000 copies a week, and within a few more weeks the sales had reached a million. Although Martin specialized in genuine Italian love songs, *That's Amore*, produced by two veteran Hollywood writers, was almost a burlesque Italian song. Unfamiliar with the then-novel Italian import of pizza, thousands of listeners misunderstood the first line of the song and puzzled over why

the moon should hit your eye "like a big piece of pie."

Genuine imports included Nat King Cole's **Answer Me, My Love**, a German song brought to him by Capitol's chief A & R man, Lee Gillette. Cole recalled that the first English version had been recorded by another singer as *Answer Me, My Lord*, but a new writer was brought in to revise the lyrics and change the tone from a gospel message to a love theme. Tony Martin's **Here** was derived from an aria from Giuseppe Verdi's 19th-century opera *Rigoletto*. Ralph Marterie, an Ohio native billed as "the Caruso of the Trumpet," had the biggest hit of his career with the South African import **Skokiaan**, its name taken from a Zulu tribal drink.

One of the most successful Broadway shows of the mid-1950s—or any other age—was Lerner and Loewe's *My Fair Lady*, which premiered March 15, 1956. It spawned a number of hits, including the original-cast album and an elegant version of **I Could Have Danced All Night** by Sylvia Syms. A veteran jazz singer who had been discovered by jazzman Benny Carter and who had appeared onstage with Mae West, Syms won national attention with this recording and was soon to join the ranks of jazz singers who made the transition to pop in the 1950s.

From the increasingly sophisticated country music publishing industry came Tony Bennett's **There'll Be No Teardrops Tonight**. The song was composed in the 1940s by country legend Hank Williams, who died at a tragically early age in 1953. Fred Rose, Williams' publisher, had managed to get pop cover versions of many Williams songs done by artists such as Rosemary Clooney, Jo Stafford and Frankie Laine; Bennett himself had already had a smash with Williams' *Cold, Cold Heart*, and he found a perfect follow-up in *Teardrops*.

**I'm a Fool to Care**, by Les Paul and Mary Ford, came from the pen of Texas singer-composer Ted Daffan. "The song was inspired by the lovely records made by the Ink Spots," he recalled. After the Ink Spots turned the tune down in 1940, Daffan himself cut it, and by 1954 his recording had come to the notice of Les Paul. Paul remembers that he canceled the disc's first release to replace it

tried out for) had won fame with this up-tempo shouter on Arthur Godfrey's television show in the early 1950s.

The McGuire Sisters, from Middleton, Ohio, were another young vocal group that became famous after appearing on *Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts* and being signed to the Decca subsidiary Coral in 1953. Their first hit was a blockbuster: **Goodnight, Sweetheart, Goodnight**. Phyllis McGuire recalled, "We were in Detroit doing a thing for General Motors and someone sent over a demo of the Moonglows doing the song, and we loved it." In the meantime, a Chicago doo-wop group called the Spaniels issued their version of the song on the Vee-Jay label and watched it climb the rhythm and blues charts. When the McGuires got their version out, they unknowingly became the first group to have a major pop hit with a cover version of an R & B song.

Another cover of a rhythm and blues song—a practice that would become increasingly pervasive as the pop music system sought to accommodate the onrushing challenge of rock 'n' roll—was the Crew-Cuts' 1954 **Sh-Boom**. The song was written and first recorded by a black quartet called the Chords; their version was a "head arrangement," improvised on the spot in Atlantic Records' studio. Atlantic released it on an obscure subsidiary called Cat, and it was soon a bestseller in the Los Angeles area.

Hill and Range, a country publisher, scooped up the rights to the song and soon got to Mercury, who assigned it to one of their promising new acts, the Crew-Cuts. Originally a Toronto group called the Canadaires, the Crew-Cuts were adept at applying barbershop harmonies to rock 'n' roll and made *Sh-Boom* the third most popular song of 1954.

**I Hear You Knocking** originated in the rich musical world of Dave Bartholomew, the New Orleans bandleader,

recording had come to the notice of Les Paul. Paul remembers that he canceled the disc's first release to replace it with *Vaya con Dios*. Fortunately for us, he reconsidered and issued this haunting performance.

Kay Starr's **The Man Upstairs** came from the first cousin to country music, gospel. A Memphis quartet called the Blackwood Brothers (a group a young Elvis Presley had

*Sisters Patience and Prudence McIntyre*



arranger and producer best known for discovering *Fats Domino*. Bartholomew had produced a version of the song in 1952 by R & B singer *Smiley Lewis*, which came to the attention of *Randy Wood*, the Tennessee owner of *Dot Records*. Wood, an expert in R & B and the creator of most of *Pat Boone's* cover versions, got the song to *Gale Storm*, who was just coming off a run of a hit NBC television show called *My Little Margie*. Though *Storm's* recording career would continue for several more years, she would never have as big a hit as *Knocking*. The song proved its durability by becoming a No. 1 hit in England in 1970 when it was released by rocker *Dave Edmunds*.

—Charles K. Wolfe

## DISCOGRAPHY

- 1. Something's Gotta Give** *Sammy Davis Jr.* • Music and lyrics by *Johnny Mercer*. Decca 29484 (1955).
- 2. Glendora** *Perry Como* • Music and lyrics by *Ray Stanley*. RCA Victor 6554 (1956). Backup vocals by the *Ray Charles Singers*. Courtesy of *BMG Music*.
- 3. (You've Got) The Magic Touch** The Platters • Music and lyrics by *Buck Ram*. Mercury 70819 (1956). Under license from *PolyGram Special Products, a Division of PolyGram Records, Inc.*
- 4. A Sweet Old Fashioned Girl** *Teresa Brewer* • Music and lyrics by *Bob Merrill*. Coral 61636 (1956).
- 5. That's Amore** *Dean Martin* • Music and lyrics by *Jack Brooks* and *Harry Warren*. Capitol 2589 (1953). Courtesy of *Capitol Records, Inc.*, under license from *CEMA Special Markets*.
- 6. Teach Me Tonight** The De Castro Sisters • Music by *Gene de Paul*, lyrics by *Sammy Cahn*. Abbott 3001 (1954). Courtesy of *BMG Music*.
- 7. Sh-Boom** The Crew-Cuts • Music and lyrics by *James Keyes*, *Claude Feaster*, *Carl Feaster*, *Floyd F. McRae* and *James Edwards*. Mercury 70404 (1954). Under license from *PolyGram Special Products, a Division of PolyGram Records, Inc.*
- 8. I Could Have Danced All Night** *Sylvia Syms* • Music by *Frederick Loewe*, lyrics by *Alan Jay Lerner*. Decca 29903 (1956).
- 9. Band of Gold** *Don Cherry* • Music by *Jack Taylor*, lyrics by *Bob Muser*. Columbia 40597 (1955). Under license from *Sony Music Special Products, a Division of Sony Music Entertainment, Inc.*
- 10. Tonight You Belong to Me** *Patience and Prudence* • Music and lyrics by *Lee David* and *Billy Rose*. Liberty 55022 (1956). Courtesy of *Capitol Records, Inc.*, under license from *CEMA Special Markets*.
- 11. Say You're Mine Again** *Perry Como* and the *Ramblers* • Music and lyrics by *Charles Nathan* and *Dave Heisker*. RCA Victor 5274 (1953). Courtesy of *BMG Music*.
- 12. I'm a Fool to Care** *Les Paul* and *Mary Ford* • Music and lyrics by *Ted Dafton*. Capitol 2839 (1954). Courtesy of *Capitol Records, Inc.*, under license from *CEMA Special Markets*.
- 13. Seven Lonely Days** *Georgia Gibbs* • Music and lyrics by *Earl Shuman*, *Alden Shuman* and *Marshall Brown*. Mercury 70095 (1953). Backup vocals by the *Yale Brothers*. Under license from *PolyGram Special Products, a Division of PolyGram Records, Inc.*
- 14. There'll Be No Tears Tonight** *Tony Bennett* • Music and lyrics by *Hank Williams* and *Nelson King*. Columbia 40169 (1954). Under license from *Sony Music Special Products, a Division of Sony Music Entertainment, Inc.*
- 15. Jilted** *Teresa Brewer* • Music and lyrics by *Dick Manning* and *Robert Colby*. Coral 61152 (1954).
- 16. I Hear You Knocking** *Gale Storm* • Music and lyrics by *Dave Bartholomew* and *Pearl King*. Dot 15412 (1955).
- 17. Answer Me, My Love** *Nat King Cole* • Music and German lyrics by *Gerhard Winkler* and *Fred Rauch*, English lyrics by *Carl Sigman*. Capitol 2687 (1954). Courtesy of *Capitol Records, Inc.*, under license from *CEMA Special Markets*.
- 18. I'll Be Home** *Pat Boone* • Music and lyrics by *Ferdinand Washington* and *Stan Lewis*. Dot 15443 (1956).
- 19. The Man Upstairs** *Kay Starr* • Music and lyrics by *Doris M. Murray*, *Mae M. Sapiro* and *Gene Markey*.



*Washington and Stan Lewis. Dot 15443 (1956).*

**19. The Man Upstairs** Kay Starr • *Music and lyrics by Dorothy Morgan, Harold Stanley and Gerry Marzars. Capitol 2769 (1954). Courtesy of Capitol Records, Inc., under license from CEMA Special Markets.*

**20. Skokiaan** Ralph Marterie and His Orchestra • *Music by August Msarurgua. Mercury 70432 (1954). Under license from PolyGram Special Products, a Division of PolyGram Records, Inc.*

**21. Wanted** Perry Como • *Music and lyrics by Jack Fulton and Lois Steele. RCA Victor 5647 (1954). Courtesy of BMG Music.*

**22. Make Yourself Comfortable** Sarah Vaughan • *Music and lyrics by Bob Merrill. Mercury 70469 (1954). Under license from PolyGram Special Products, a Division of PolyGram Records, Inc.*

**23. Goodnight, Sweetheart, Goodnight** The McGuire Sisters • *Music and lyrics by Calvin Carter and James Hudson. Coral 61187 (1954).*

**24. Here** Tony Martin • *Music and lyrics by Dorcas Cochran and Harold Grant. Based on Caro Nome from Giuseppe Verdi's Rigoletto. RCA Victor 5665 (1954). Courtesy of BMG Music.*

*The unstoppable Sammy Davis Jr.—Mr. Entertainment—lost an eye in an auto accident in November 1954 but was back onstage in a matter of weeks jauntily sporting his eye patch.*

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- 1 **Something's Gotta Give** Sammy Davis Jr.
- 2 **Glendora** Perry Como
- 3 **(You've Got) The Magic Touch** The Platters
- 4 **A Sweet Old Fashioned Girl** Teresa Brewer
- 5 **That's Amore** Dean Martin
- 6 **Teach Me Tonight** The De Castro Sisters
- 7 **Sh-Boom** The Crew-Cuts
- 8 **I Could Have Danced All Night** Sylvia Syms
- 9 **Band of Gold** Don Cherry
- 10 **Tonight You Belong to Me** Patience and Prudence
- 11 **Say You're Mine Again** Perry Como and the Ramblers
- 12 **I'm a Fool to Care** Les Paul and Mary Ford
- 13 **Seven Lonely Days** Georgia Gibbs
- 14 **There'll Be No Teardrops Tonight** Tony Bennett
- 15 **Jilted** Teresa Brewer
- 16 **I Hear You Knocking** Gale Storm
- 17 **Answer Me, My Love** Nat King Cole
- 18 **I'll Be Home** Pat Boone
- 19 **The Man Upstairs** Kay Starr
- 20 **Skokiaan** Ralph Marterie and His Orchestra
- 21 **Wanted** Perry Como
- 22 **Make Yourself Comfortable** Sarah Vaughan
- 23 **Goodnight, Sweetheart, Goodnight**  
The McGuire Sisters
- 24 **Here** Tony Martin



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The Mid-'50s was produced by Time-Life Music in cooperation with MCA Records, Inc. Digitally remastered at Digiprep; Dan Hersch, engineer.

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