

# THE LATE '50s



TIME  
LIFE  
MUSIC

*Johnny Mathis*



# THE LATE '50s

By the late 1950s, most of America's great pop singers were learning that they couldn't really adapt their classic styles to the new sounds of rock 'n' roll, and they began falling back on what they could do best: soft, lyrical, romantic ballads. The novelties, the big-band shouters and the folk ballads that had marked the early part of the decade were by and large missing from the later years.

More and more singers began to see the long-playing album as their medium, and more and more songs were being done with lavish orchestrations, mood-enhancing arrangements and smooth-as-silk vocal styles. Whether in elegant supper clubs, on live television shows or at quiet candlelight dinners with a stereo console playing softly in the background, the pop music of this age had one clear message: Romance was back.

The master of the romantic ballad, Nat King Cole, set the tone with songs like **Darling Je Vous Aime Beaucoup**. Cole borrowed this number from the singer Hildegard, who had used it as her theme back in 1935. He recalled: "It was between shows while I was playing at the Paramount Theater in San Francisco. I went with [songwriter] Jimmy Van Heusen to a club called the Purple Onion and we heard a French-type singer doing this song. That reminded me that I'd always liked the number, and the next day I called [Capitol records producer] Lee Gillette and arranged to do it." Nat's straightforward reading, backed by Nelson Riddle's full studio orchestra and chorus, made *Darling Je Vous Aime Beaucoup* a permanent part of the Cole repertoire as well as a top-10 hit.

Songs with French lyrics or backgrounds soon became commonplace on the American charts. Jacques Larue and

Alain Romans had written **Padre** in 1957; after Paul Francis Webster fitted the Gallic original with English lyrics, it was introduced by Lola Dee and then covered in a more successful version by Toni Arden. Though it was to be Arden's last major hit, the record stayed in print for years and over time sold more than a million copies.

Almost as popular was composer Wayne Shanklin's **Chanson d'Amour**. Introduced in 1958 by Art and Dotty Todd, the song spent more than three months on the charts—in spite of sometimes being confused with *Melodie d'Amour*, the Ames Brothers song that had just been a top-10 hit.

Then there was Johnny Mathis, perhaps the most romantic of all the younger singers. One of seven children, he had grown up in San Francisco in a musical family, excelling both athletically and in choir. One day at a college track meet the scheduled singer for the national anthem failed to show up, and Johnny's teammates talked him into doing it. After this, he recalled, "I realized I wasn't afraid of crowds and I began to look for a singing job." He eventually auditioned for Columbia Records. In 1956 he received an invitation to try out for the U.S. Olympic team and one to come to New York to cut some sides for Columbia. He chose *New York*.

One of the songs from that first session was **It's Not for Me to Say**. Mathis had run into songwriter Robert Allen on a New York street shortly before his recording session and asked him to write something for him. A week later, Allen played the music of the new song for Mathis. He liked it and included it in his first film, *Lizzie*. The song did a lot better than the movie, however, and soon was roosting high

on the charts.

**Chances Are**, by the same team of Robert Allen and Al Stillman, was recorded in June 1957 and became an even bigger hit. In Mathis' opinion, *Chances Are* was "technically the best record I made in that early period, and sort of established me as someone who might be around for a while."

Mellow in a different way was Brook Benton's **So Many Ways**, from 1959. A former gospel singer from Camden, South Carolina, Benton had already made it as a songwriter, with recordings of his work by Nat King Cole and Roy Hamilton, when he was signed as a singer by Clyde Otis of Mercury Records. After hits like *So Many Ways* and *It's Just a Matter of Time*, critics began referring to his "velvet-toned" style and how well it suited his material.

Earl Grant, on the other hand, had a voice so similar to Cole's that rumors started circulating that he was Nat's brother. He was, in fact, an Oklahoma City native who grew up playing the organ in his father's church, and he eventually found his way to Southern California, where he began playing clubs. **The End** was his most evocative recording and his biggest hit single, though many of his LPs sold nearly as well.

From Nashville came the ballad styles of Pat Boone and Jim Reeves. Both singers came to the pop ballad from other kinds of music, Boone from rock 'n' roll and Reeves from country. Boone grew up as a gospel and pop singer in Gallatin, Tennessee, near Nashville, and won his initial fame by doing cover versions of rhythm and blues records for the local Dot label. But his warm baritone and 1940s phrasing were much better suited to mainstream pop, and after his initial successes he turned more and more to pieces like **Sugar Moon** (not to be confused with the Bob Wills recording with the same name).

Reeves found his first major pop hit in a pile of lead sheets on the desk of RCA producer Chet Atkins. Though Atkins had envisioned **Four Walls** as a "woman's song," he let Reeves try his hand at it and set up a session in Nashville that was remarkable for the fact that there was no

fiddle or steel guitar, just a rhythm section and the rich quartet sound of the Jordanaires. The new sound appealed to both country and pop fans, and soon some 750,000 copies of the record were snatched up.

From the rhythm and blues charts came Georgia Gibbs' version of **Tweedle Dee**, a song that surprised everybody by coming in second in 1955's annual survey of songs with the largest radio and TV audiences. Gibbs, who was featured on the *Your Hit Parade* radio show in the 1940s and on her own network TV show in 1957, had a string of hits in the 1950s that included a number of cover versions of rhythm and blues hits. (On her television show she routinely played the original version of a song before she sang her own rendition, and was careful to pay homage to the song's originator.) *Tweedle Dee* came from veteran Chicago singer LaVern Baker, who took the song to No. 4 on the R & B charts.

As always, good singers continued to remake old songs and find new life in hits of earlier years. Two such revitalized songs came from the repertoire of the irrepressible singer and pianist of the 1930s, Fats Waller. **It's a Sin to Tell a Lie**, which had actually been introduced by the staid Kate Smith in 1936, was revived by Something' Smith and the Redheads in 1955. Fats had a big hit with **I'm Gonna Sit Right Down and Write Myself a Letter** in 1935, but Billy Williams surpassed even Waller with his natty 1957 version. Williams was another veteran of gospel music. His Sammy Davis Jr. brand of show biz style and the fancy triple-tongued brass part he used on this recording show the pizzazz that made Williams one of the first black singers to appear regularly on television in the 1950s.

Comedian Jerry Lewis surprised a lot of people in the 1950s when he began to demonstrate that he, like his former partner, Dean Martin, could handle a song as well as a joke. **Rock-a-Bye Your Baby with a Dixie Melody** was Lewis' tribute to Al Jolson, who had had the original hit with the piece back in 1918.



*Her Nibs, Miss Georgia Gibbs*



And the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra's **Tea for Two Cha Cha** was a revival on two counts: It was a rearrangement of a song from *No, No, Nanette* that had become a standard in the years since the Broadway show opened in 1924, and it was by a big band that had suffered the loss of its leader in 1956. Trombone player Warren Covington had taken over the band after Dorsey's death, and he propelled it to a new series of successful singles and albums, showing the pop music world that there was other dance music besides rock 'n' roll.

—Charles K. Wolfe

## DISCOGRAPHY

- 1. Tweedle Dee** Georgia Gibbs • Music and lyrics by Winfield Scott. Mercury 70517 (1955). Under license from PolyGram Special Products, a Division of PolyGram Records, Inc.
- 1. I'm Gonna Sit Right Down and Write Myself a Letter** Billy Williams • Music by Fred E. Ahlert, lyrics by Joe Young. Coral 61830 (1957).
- 1. Big Man** The Four Preps • Music and lyrics by Glen Larson and Bruce Belland. Capitol 3960 (1958). Courtesy of Capitol Records, Inc., under license from CEMA Special Markets.
- 4. Can You Find It in Your Heart** Tony Bennett • Music by Robert Allen, lyrics by Al Stillman. Columbia 40667 (1956). Under license from Sony Music Special Products, a Division of Sony Music Entertainment, Inc.
- 5. A Tear Fell** Teresa Brewer • Music and lyrics by Dorian Burton and Eugene Randolph. Coral 61590 (1956).
- 6. Rock-a-Bye Your Baby with a Dixie Melody** Jerry Lewis • Music and lyrics by Jean Schwartz, Joseph Young and Samuel Lewis. Decca 30124 (1956).
- 7. Tea for Two Cha Cha** The Tommy Dorsey Orchestra • Music by Vincent Youmans. Decca 30704 (1958). Orchestra led by Warren Covington.
- 8. Darling Je Vous Aime Beaucoup** Nat King Cole • Music and lyrics by Anna Sosenka. Capitol 3027 (1955). Courtesy of Capitol Records, Inc., under license from CEMA Special Markets.
- 9. Mr. Wonderful** Peggy Lee • Music and lyrics by Jerry Bock, Larry Holofcaver and George Weiss. Decca 29834 (1956).
- 10. It's Almost Tomorrow** The Dream Weavers • Music by Eugene H. Adkinson, lyrics by Wade Buff. Decca 29683 (1956).
- 11. Garden of Eden** Joe Valino • Music and lyrics by Dennise Haas Norwood. Vik 0226 (1956). Courtesy of BMG Music.
- 12. May You Always** The McGuire Sisters • Music and lyrics by Larry Markes and Dick Charles. Coral 62059 (1959).
- 13. I Like Your Kind of Love** Andy Williams • Music and lyrics by Melvin Endsley. Cadence 1323 (1957). Backup vocal by Peggy Powers. Courtesy of Barnaby Records Inc.
- 14. Chanson d'Amour (Song of Love)** Art and Dotty Todd • Music and lyrics by Wayne Shanklin. Era 1064 (1958). Courtesy of K-Tel International (USA), Inc.
- 15. Chances Are** Johnny Mathis • Music by Robert Allen, lyrics by Al Stillman. Columbia 40993 (1957). Under license from Sony Music Special Products, a Division of Sony Music





Entertainment, Inc.

**16. Four Walls** Jim Reeves • Music and lyrics by Marvin Moore and George Campbell. RCA Victor 6874 (1957). Courtesy of BMG Music.

**17. Padre** Toni Arden • Music by Alain Romans, English lyrics by Paul Francis Webster. Decca 30628 (1958).

**18. It's a Sin to Tell a Lie** Somethin' Smith and the Redheads • Music and lyrics by Billy Mayheu. Epic 9093 (1955). Under license from Sony Music Special Products, a Division of Sony Music Entertainment, Inc.

**19. Left Right Out of Your Heart (Hi Lee Hi Lo Hi Lap Up Up)** Patti Page • Music by Mort Garson, lyrics by Earl Shuman. Mercury 71331 (1958). Under license from PolyGram Special Products, a Division of PolyGram Records, Inc.

**20. So Many Ways** Brook Benton • Music and lyrics by Bobby Stevenson. Mercury 71512 (1959). Under license from PolyGram Special Products, a Division of PolyGram Records, Inc.

**21. Hummingbird** Les Paul and Mary Ford • Music and lyrics by Don Robertson. Capitol 3165 (1955). Courtesy of Capitol Records, Inc., under license from CEMA Special Markets.

**22. It's Not for Me to Say** Johnny Mathis • Music by Robert Allen, lyrics by Al Stillman. Columbia 40851 (1957). Under license from Sony Music Special Products, a Division of Sony Music Entertainment, Inc.

**23. Sugar Moon** Pat Boone • Music and lyrics by Danny Wolf. Dot 15750 (1958).

**24. The End** Earl Grant • Music and lyrics by Jimmy Krondes and Sidney Jacobson. Decca 30719 (1958).

*The Four Preps*

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- 1 **Twedle Dee** Georgia Gibbs
- 2 **I'm Gonna Sit Right Down and Write Myself a Letter** Billy Williams
- 3 **Big Man** The Four Preps
- 4 **Can You Find It in Your Heart** Tony Bennett
- 5 **A Tear Fell** Teresa Brewer
- 6 **Rock-a-Bye Your Baby with a Dixie Melody** Jerry Lewis
- 7 **Tea for Two Cha Cha** The Tommy Dorsey Orchestra
- 8 **Darling Je Vous Aime Beaucoup** Nat King Cole
- 9 **Mr. Wonderful** Peggy Lee
- 10 **It's Almost Tomorrow** The Dream Weavers
- 11 **Garden of Eden** Joe Valino
- 12 **May You Always** The McGuire Sisters
- 13 **I Like Your Kind of Love** Andy Williams
- 14 **Chanson d'Amour (Song of Love)** Art and Dotty Todd
- 15 **Chances Are** Johnny Mathis
- 16 **Four Walls** Jim Reeves
- 17 **Padre** Toni Arden
- 18 **It's a Sin to Tell a Lie**  
Somethin' Smith and the Redheads
- 19 **Left Right Out of Your Heart (Hi Lee Hi Lo Hi  
Lup Up Up)** Patti Page
- 20 **So Many Ways** Brook Benton
- 21 **Hummingbird** Les Paul and Mary Ford
- 22 **It's Not for Me to Say** Johnny Mathis
- 23 **Sugar Moon** Pat Boone
- 24 **The End** Earl Grant



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