

# THE '50s



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*The Weavers (from top): Pete Seeger, Lee Hays, Fred  
Hellerman and Ronnie Gilbert*



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Fans with even the most casual interest in pop music know that the decade of the 1950s marked one of the great watersheds in musical history. The dramatic change, of course, came from the sudden emergence of rock 'n' roll in the middle of the decade and the way in which rock changed the whole face of the hit parade in just a few years. In the early '50s, pop singers doing their version of the No. 1 song on the charts found themselves imitating a classic crooner like Eddie Fisher on **Forgive Me**. At the end of the decade, they were struggling to figure out how to do an orchestrated version of Chubby Checker's *The Twist*.

Yet in some ways, the change wasn't all that sudden. For one thing, not all pop singers were antagonistic toward the newer up-tempo music. Artists as sedate as Nat King Cole and Perry Como tried to incorporate aspects of the new music into their work, and others managed to appeal to both camps for a while. Some of these "transitional" singers produced memorable hits in their own right and helped build bridges between the old and the new; they proved, once again, that the hit parade was a rich and heady brew of diverse musical styles and sources.

No singer better reflects this transition era than Jacksonville, Florida, native Charles Eugene "Pat" Boone. Though he is remembered by rock fans for his sanitized cover versions of rhythm and blues hits, about half of Boone's charted hits were crooner songs—mellow, well-wrought pieces like **If Dreams Came True**.

In fact, when he started his career on the television shows of Ted Mack and Arthur Godfrey, he was singing the repertoire of Perry Como, Frankie Laine and Kay Starr. Then Randy Wood, the guiding genius behind the independent

Dot label, signed Boone and persuaded him to try rhythm and blues covers. Boone later recalled getting his first song from Wood: "I'm imagining a Perry Como or Eddie Fisher sort of ballad. Why Randy thought I could sing a rock 'n' roll song I really don't know." After he proved his worth with covers, however, Boone returned often to the older style, even doing an album of Irving Berlin evergreens.

In 1956 one of his most popular records ever was released. **Friendly Persuasion**, the title song from the acclaimed William Wyler film about a Quaker family trying to cope with the Civil War, was written by two Hollywood veterans, Paul Francis Webster (*Love Is a Mary-Splendored Thing*) and Dimitri Tiomkin (*High Noon*). The producers of the movie were so pleased with Boone's recording that they used it in the sound track, assuring him of an appeal to not only teenagers but also their parents.

Similar in style to Pat Boone was winsome Connie Francis, another Arthur Godfrey veteran who sang in a slick, "clean" style that had across-the-board appeal—enough to net her over 50 Hot 100 hits from 1958 to 1969. At the suggestion of her father, Francis began resurrecting older songs from the 1920s and 1930s; she arranged them with just the right touch of rock 'n' roll (such as a heavy backbeat and a tenor sax) and watched them climb the charts.

**My Happiness** was written in the Depression by a Kansas City bandleader named Borney Bergantine. In 1948 it became a million-selling record not only by the Pied Pipers, formerly Tommy Dorsey's singing group, but also by a Kansas City country duo, Jon and Sandra Steele. The Connie Francis version gave the song yet another lease on life, keeping it on the charts some 18 weeks in 1958 and 1959.

One of the influential figures of the decade was Columbia Records executive Mitch Miller. Though he referred to rock 'n' roll as "musical illiteracy" and vowed Columbia would not record it, still he recognized its power—he half-heartedly bid on the contract of the young Elvis Presley. He also encouraged some of his artists to try up-tempo experiments that moved in the direction of rock 'n' roll.

One such effort was **Botch-a-Me**, the 1952 part-English, part-Italian send-up by Rosemary Clooney. The song was used in a 1941 Italian film and was titled *Ba-Ba-Baciami Piccina*; the refrain "baciami" became "botch-a-me" in English. Clooney recalled: "Mitch Miller was continually looking for new things for me to do on records, and he often left little mistakes in a recording session that added originality to the number." On *Botch-a-Me*, for instance, "Stan Freeman was playing the harpsichord and Percy Faith walked in during the recording and was teasing Stan. Right in the middle of the take, the music fell down on Stan's hands. You can hear the fumbling at the harpsichord on the record."

Miller was fond of using the harpsichord, and he featured it on a 1957 hit by his protégée Jill Corey, **Love Me to Pieces**. The song came from young Arkansas writer Melvin Endsley, who had just scored with *Singing the Blues*. The heavy beat and the bass guitar riff added a touch of rock 'n' roll to the song's country roots—and gave Jill Corey her biggest song. Corey, a veteran of the Dave Garroway and Johnny Carson TV shows, became a regular on *Your Hit Parade* later that year.

Vocal groups were especially adept at making the move back and forth between rock 'n' roll and pop. Early in the decade the Hilltoppers—named after the basketball team from the college they all attended, Western Kentucky in Bowling Green—started their string of 25 hits. Customarily dressed in college letter sweaters and beanies, the group featured the lead singing of organizer Jimmy Sacca as well as the arranging of young Bill Vaughn, who later became musical director and bandleader for Dot, their label. **Till Then**, also recorded by the Mills Brothers, is typical of the Hilltoppers' doo-wop-tinged work.

Then there was the Platters, the superb black vocal group

Many of the classics from the 1950s, though, were still framed with the lush orchestration that recalled post supper clubs, pops concerts and lavish Broadway shows. One of the most memorable was Nat King Cole's **Unforgettable**. It was written by Irving Gordon, a former Duke Ellington collaborator, and taken to Nat in 1951. The session was his first with the man who would become the premier studio orchestra leader of the decade, Nelson Riddle. Cole recalled: "This date really showed everybody what Nelson could do. Later on he was 'discovered' by a lot of singers. It's easy to discover a gold mine when you can see it shining."

Even more formal is **Cara Mia**, sung by David Whitfield with Mantovani's glistening orchestral sound. The song was written by "Lee Lange" and "Tulio Trapani"—pseudonyms for Decca executive Bunny Lewis and Mantovani himself. Whitfield was a former sailor in the Royal Navy who had entertained the troops with his classical tenor; after his hitch, he worked at a stonemason's yard before radio and records made him famous. With *Cara Mia*, Whitfield became the first male British singer to have a million-selling record in the U.S.

Other songs fit into no neat categories but recall the decade in brief, vivid glimpses: the recent establishment of Israel and the popularity of **Tzena Tzena Tzena** in 1950; the nationwide religious revival in the early 1950s, exemplified by the Billy Graham Crusades and "religioso" songs like **I Believe**; the cigarette advertising campaign built around Vaughn Monroe's **Sound Off**; the saucy jokes made from the title **Takes Two to Tango**.

Even the innocuous **Nola** by guitar genius Les Paul has its own special pop culture connotations. Many people remember it as the music played at drive-in theaters during intermission, as moviegoers watched a giant clock on the screen ticking off the time left to get to the concession stand. Music as nostalgia, to be sure, but music of a decade that changed American life.

—Charles K. Wolfe

director and bandleader for Dot, their label. **Till Then**, also recorded by the Mills Brothers, is typical of the Hilltoppers' doo-wop-tinged work.

Then there was the Platters, the superb black vocal group that was sometimes covered by the Hilltoppers. Developed by vocal coach and songwriter Buck Ram in Los Angeles, the group, with lead singer Tony Williams, began to crack the pop charts in 1955. In 1956 **The Great Pretender** did even more to bring them into the mainstream. One of the Platters, Paul Robi, recalled: "When our first two records hit, it was like we were getting away with murder because people in the South did not know we were black until we got on *The Ed Sullivan Show* and by that time it was too late."

—Charles K. Wolfe



Vaughn Monroe on the air



## DISCOGRAPHY

1. **The House of Blue Lights** Chuck Miller • *Music and lyrics by Don Raye and Freddie Slack. Mercury 70627 (1955). Under license from PolyGram Special Products, a Division of PolyGram Records, Inc.*
2. **Tina Marie** Perry Como • *Music and lyrics by Bob Merrill. RCA Victor 6192 (1955). Backup vocals by the Ray Charles Singers. Courtesy of BMG Music.*
- X 3. **Botch-a-Me (Ba-Ba-Baciami Piccina)** Rosemary Clooney • *Music and lyrics by Eddie Y. Stanley, Ricardo Morbelli and Luigi Astore. Columbia 39767 (1952). Under license from Sory Music Special Products, a Division of Sory Music Entertainment, Inc.*
- X 4. **Till We Two Are One** George Shaw • *Music by Larry Martin and Billy Martin, lyrics by Tom Glazer. Decca 28937 (1954). Backup vocals by the Jimmy Leyden Singers.*
- X 5. **In the Chapel in the Moonlight** Kitty Kallen • *Music and lyrics by Billy Hill. Decca 29130 (1954).*
- X 6. **Till Then** The Hilltoppers • *Music and lyrics by Eddie Seiler, Sol Marcus and Guy Wood. Dot 15132 (1954).*
- X 7. **Tzena Tzena Tzena** Gordon Jenkins and His Orchestra and the Weavers • *Music and lyrics by Issachar Miron, Mitchell Parish and Yehiel Haggiz. Decca 27077 (1950).*
- X 8. **Takes Two to Tango** Pearl Bailey • *Music and lyrics by Al Hoffman and Dick Manning. Coral 60817 (1952).*
9. **Play Me Hearts and Flowers (I Wanna Cry)** Johnny Desmond • *Music by Sanford Green, lyrics by Mann Curtis. Coral 61379 (1955).*
10. **The Great Pretender** The Platters • *Music and lyrics by Buck Ram. Mercury 70753 (1956). Under license from PolyGram Special Products, a Division of PolyGram Records, Inc.*
- X 11. **Please, Mr. Sun** Johnnie Ray • *Music by Ray Getzow, lyrics by Sid Frank. Columbia 39636 (1952). Backup vocals by the Four Lads. Under license from Sory Music Special Products, a Division of Sory Music Entertainment, Inc.*
- X 12. **Friendly Persuasion (Thee I Love)** Pat Boone • *Music by Dimitri Tiomkin, lyrics by Paul Francis Webster. Dot 15490 (1956).*
- X 13. **Sound Off** Vaughn Monroe and His Orchestra • *Music and lyrics by Willie Lee Duckworth. RCA Victor 4113 (1951). Vocal by Vaughn Monroe with chorus. Courtesy of BMG Music.*
- X 14. **Hot Toddy** Ralph Flanagan and His Orchestra • *Music by Ralph Flanagan. RCA Victor 5095 (1953). Courtesy of BMG Music.*
15. **The Tijuana Jail** The Kingston Trio • *Music and lyrics by...*



- 14. **Hot Toddy** Ralph Flanagan and His Orchestra • *Music by Ralph Flanagan. RCA Victor 5095 (1953). Courtesy of BMG Music.*
- 15. **The Tijuana Jail** The Kingston Trio • *Music and lyrics by Denny Thompson. Capitol 4167 (1959). Courtesy of Capitol Records, Inc., under license from CEMA Special Markets.*
- 16. **Mama from the Train** Patti Page • *Music and lyrics by Irving Gordon. Mercury 70971 (1956). Under license from PolyGram Special Products, a Division of PolyGram Records, Inc.*
- 17. **Unforgettable** Nat King Cole • *Music and lyrics by Irving Gordon. Capitol 1808 (1952). Courtesy of Capitol Records, Inc., under license from CEMA Special Markets.*
- 18. **I Believe** Frankie Laine • *Music and lyrics by Ervin Drake, Jimmy Shirl, Al Stillman and Irvin Graham. Columbia 39938 (1953). Under license from Sony Music Special Products, a Division of Sony Music Entertainment, Inc.*
- 19. **Love Me to Pieces** Jill Corey • *Music and lyrics by Melvin Endsley. Columbia 40955 (1957). Under license from Sony Music Special Products, a Division of Sony Music Entertainment, Inc.*
- 20. **Nola** Les Paul • *Music by Felix Arndt. Capitol 1014 (1950). Courtesy of Capitol Records, Inc., under license from CEMA Special Markets.*
- 21. **Forgive Me** Eddie Fisher • *Music by Milton Ager, lyrics by Jack Yellen. RCA Victor 4574 (1952). Courtesy of BMG Music.*
- 22. **If Dreams Came True** Pat Boone • *Music by Robert Allen, lyrics by Al Stillman. Dot 15785 (1958).*
- 23. **My Happiness** Connie Francis • *Music by Borney Bergantine, lyrics by Betty Peterson. MGM 12738 (1959). Under license from PolyGram Special Products, a Division of PolyGram Records, Inc.*
- 24. **Cara Mia** David Whitfield with Mantovani and His Orchestra and Chorus • *Music and lyrics by Tulio Trapani and Lee Lange. London 1486 (1954). Under license from PolyGram Special Products, a Division of PolyGram Records, Inc.*

*Pearl Bailey had a droll, down-to-earth quality that came across in everything she put her hand to. Perhaps her greatest success was on Broadway, in a 1967 all-female version of Hello, Dolly!*

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- 1 **The House of Blue Lights** Chuck Miller
- 2 **Tina Marie** Perry Como
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Rosemary Clooney
- 4 **Till We Two Are One** Georgie Shaw
- 5 **In the Chapel in the Moonlight** Kitty Kallen
- 6 **Till Then** The Hilltoppers
- 7 **Tzena Tzena Tzena** Gordon Jenkins and His  
Orchestra and the Weavers
- 8 **Takes Two to Tango** Pearl Bailey
- 9 **Play Me Hearts and Flowers (I Wanna Cry)**  
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- 10 **The Great Pretender** The Platters
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- 18 **I Believe** Frankie Laine
- 19 **Love Me to Pieces** Jill Corey
- 20 **Nola** Les Paul
- 21 **Forgive Me** Eddie Fisher
- 22 **If Dreams Came True** Pat Boone
- 23 **My Happiness** Connie Francis
- 24 **Cara Mia** David Whitfield with Mantovani and His  
Orchestra and Chorus



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

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Time-Life Music wishes to thank William L. Schurk of the Music Library and Sound Recordings Archives, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio, for providing valuable reference material.

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MSD-35249 HPD-25