

THE FABULOUS '50s



TIME
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MUSIC

Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong



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On September 20, 1958, readers of *Cash Box* noticed that a new record had climbed onto the singles chart: Gordon MacRae's gentle, doo-wop-flavored ballad **The Secret** was to be the last in a string of hit singles for the versatile 37-year-old. MacRae had begun his career as a child actor. He had worked with the veteran singer and dancer Ray Bolger, and by the time he was old enough to drive a car, he was making records for Capitol. His hits ranged from ersatz cowboy songs like *Hair of Gold*, *Eyes of Blue* to the inspirational favorite *Whispering Hope*, done as a duet with Jo Stafford.

Yet his warm baritone and rugged good looks soon led him to films and to that special genre that saw its last great flowering in the 1950s: the musical. MacRae appeared in *The Desert Song* (1953), *Oklahoma* (1955) and *Carousel* (1956), developing a following that went far beyond his jukebox success. His voice boomed from Cinemascope screens, television sets and transistor radios, and he was proof positive that singing stars were no longer just recording stars.

In an age when forays into film and theater by singing stars like Madonna and Sting are media events, it may be hard to imagine a time when such versatility was almost taken for granted. But in the 1950s it was. Most of the decade's more memorable performers won their public not just by making records but also by acting in the theater and films and by hosting radio or television shows.

At the time Dean Martin released **Sway** in 1954, for instance, he was famous as Jerry Lewis' straight man in the comedy team of Martin and Lewis. Starting in 1949, the pair made some 13 movies and became television stars through *The Colgate Comedy Hour*. Born Dino Crocetti in

Steuvenville, Ohio, Martin had tried his hand at mining and boxing before he opted for show business and teamed with Lewis in 1946. He had also started singing in films and had a number of hits by 1954—two years before his breakup with Lewis. *Sway*, one of his most infectious releases, was a reworking of a Mexican song called *Quien Sera* and was a pleasant change from the Italian fare that Martin seemed to specialize in. His solo movie career was just around the corner, as was solo success in television and LP recording.

Rosemary Clooney managed to have a hit with **Mambo Italiano** and make no fewer than four feature films in 1953 and 1954. Her success with hits like *Come On-a My House* had won her national exposure, from the cover of *Time* to a stand at Las Vegas' Thunderbird Hotel. Starting as a radio singer for WLW in Cincinnati, Clooney had worked her way up to top billing in a 1953 Paramount movie called *The Stars Are Singing*—"not the most memorable film ever produced in Hollywood," she noted. But the next two projects paired her with major stars: Bob Hope in *Here Come the Girls*, Bing Crosby in *White Christmas*. In between came a wildly publicized marriage to actor José Ferrer in July 1953. *Mambo Italiano* stemmed from the latest dance craze and from an earlier Italian-flavored hit of Rosie's, *Botch-a-Me*.

Other singers of the time were known primarily for their work on television. Young Julius La Rosa from Brooklyn became a regular on *Arthur Godfrey and His Friends*, a radio show that became a TV staple in 1949. Soon the singer became one of what his boss called "all the little Godfreys" and was drawing thousands of fan letters a week. Working with the show's music director, Archie Bleyer,



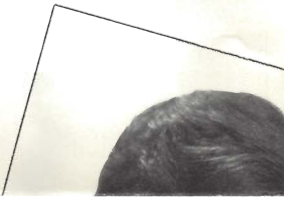
Brook Benton


La Rosa began to issue a series of records, and in February 1953 had a top-10 hit with **Anywhere I Wander** (from the film *Hans Christian Andersen*).

In October 1953 La Rosa became an unwilling participant in one of the most controversial and dramatic incidents in the age of live TV: he was fired on the air by Godfrey. Apparently angry that La Rosa had gotten an agent and insisting publicly that he had lost his "humility," Godfrey explained at the end of La Rosa's number that "that was Julie's swan song." La Rosa soon recovered, however, made a series of guest shots on *The Ed Sullivan Show* and had a string of hits and his own TV variety show.

Then there was Don Cherry from Dallas who, according to his publicity, took time off from playing golf tournaments to trek into the recording studios. Cherry—not to be confused with the avant-garde trumpet player of the same name—had won his spurs singing for Tommy Dorsey in the postwar years, and he was reunited with Dorsey's ace arranger Sy Oliver for **Vanity**, his big 1951 winner.

Brook Benton, from Camden, South Carolina, achieved his initial fame in gospel music. As a teenager, he set out for the North to sell his songs. After an apprenticeship with the legendary gospel group the Golden Gate Quartet and experience cutting demos for singers like Nat King Cole and Clyde McPhatter, he teamed with





European star Caterina Valeri sang in English, Spanish, French, Italian, German and Swedish and danced too.

writer Clyde Otis and began creating his own solo efforts. One of the first and best was **Endlessly**, which spotlighted the warm ballad style that would eventually help Benton sell eight top-10 hits.

Other pop stars of the 1950s moved from jazz into mainstream music. Trumpet player Louis Armstrong had been recognized as a key figure in jazz since his first recordings in the 1920s. Though he continued to lead his jazz band in the '50s, "Pops" found himself recording more and more of his unique, gravelly vocals with studio orchestras and trying duets with the likes of Bing Crosby, the Mills Brothers and Ella Fitzgerald. Some jazz purists complained, but soon Armstrong had an impressive string of *Billboard* hits that included **A Kiss to Build a Dream On**. The song had been used in a film called *The Strip* and featured Louis in front of Sy Oliver's Orchestra, with jazz veteran Lenny Cutshall providing the neat trombone obbligato.

Another well-respected jazzman, pianist Bobby Scott, had a brief fling with the top 10 when his version of **Chain Gang** came out in 1956. Scott was only 19 at the time, but he had already had a varied career, having worked with trumpet player Louis Prima, clarinet player Tony Scott, drummer Gene Krupa and pianists Marian McPartland and Lennie Tristano. Later he wrote music for the play *A Taste of Honey* and the movie *The Color Purple* and produced sessions for artists like Aretha Franklin and Jesse Colin Young. *Chain Gang* (a different song from Sam Cooke's 1960 hit) offers a brassy big-band sound set off by a folksy banjo, seasoned with a background choir and propelled by Scott's soulful vocal.

Blue Velvet, on the other hand, was pop music that qualified as jazz. Tony Bennett had not yet earned his reputation as one of the era's greatest stylists when he cut the tune in 1951; indeed, his big hit just before it had been a cover of country singer Hank Williams' *Cold, Cold Heart*. But Bennett's work on *Blue Velvet*,

DISCOGRAPHY

1. **Crazy 'Bout Ya Baby** The Crew-Cuts • *Music by Rudi Mauger, lyrics by Pat Barrett. Mercury 70341 (1954). Under license from PolyGram Special Products, a Division of PolyGram Group Distribution, Inc.*
2. **Hey Joe!** Frankie Laine • *Music and lyrics by Boudleaux Bryant. Columbia 40036 (1953). Backup vocals by the Norman Luboff Choir. Under license from Sony Music Special Products, a Division of Sony Music Entertainment, Inc.*
3. **The Secret** Gordon MacRae • *Music and lyrics by Joe Lubin and I. J. Roth. Capitol 4033 (1958). Courtesy of Capitol Records, Inc., under license from CEMA Special Markets.*
4. **I'm in Love Again** April Stevens • *Music and lyrics by Cole Porter. RCA Victor 4148 (1951). Courtesy of BMG Music.*
5. **I Understand** The Four Tunes • *Music and lyrics by Pat Best. Jubilee 5132 (1954). Courtesy of Jubilee Records, a label of Rhino Records, Inc.*
6. **The Breeze and I** Caterina Valente • *Music by Ernesto Lecuona and Tutti Camarata, lyrics by Al Stillman. Adapted from Lecuona's *Andalucía*. Decca 29467 (1955).*
7. **Gambler's Guitar** Rusty Draper • *Music and lyrics by Jim Lowe. Mercury 70167 (1953). Under license from PolyGram Special Products, a Division of PolyGram Group Distribution, Inc.*
8. **Sway** Dean Martin • *Music by Pablo Beltran Ruiz, English lyrics by Norman Gimbel. Capitol 2818 (1954). Courtesy of Capitol Records, Inc., under license from CEMA Special Markets.*
9. **Mambo Italiano** Rosemary Clooney • *Music and lyrics by Bob Merrill. Columbia 40361 (1954). Backup vocals by the Mellomen. Under license from Sony Music Special Products, a Division of Sony Music Entertainment, Inc.*
10. **From the Vine Came the Grape** The Gaylords • *Music by Leonard Whittcup, lyrics by Paul Cunningham. Mercury 70296 (1954). Under license from PolyGram Special Products, a Division of PolyGram Group Distribution, Inc.*
11. **Blue Velvet** Tony Bennett • *Music and lyrics by Bernie Wayne and Lee Morris. Columbia 39555 (1951). Under license from Sony Music Special Products, a Division of Sony Music Entertainment, Inc.*
12. **Endlessly** Brook Benton • *Music and lyrics by Clyde Otis and Brook Benton. Mercury 71443 (1959). Under license from PolyGram Special Products, a Division of PolyGram Group Distribution, Inc.*

with its spare orchestration and elegant piano backing, was pure singing at its best and won accolades from surprising sources. Bennett recalled going to Birdland shortly after the record came out to see Ella Fitzgerald. Ella came over to his table and told him how much she loved it. "For a young singer to be endorsed by the great Ella Fitzgerald," mused Bennett, "was unforgettable!" Years later, *Blue Velvet* was revived by Bobby Vinton and still later became the theme of a controversial movie of that name.

Other hit-makers of the '50s came to pop by even more circuitous routes. Don Robertson, who chirped his way through **The Happy Whistler**, had studied folk music with poet Carl Sandburg and written country songs for Eddy Arnold and Hank Snow before he tried a performing career. Guitar designer Billy Grammer was an ace studio guitar player for King Records in the late 1940s and early 1950s before he moved to Nashville and let producer Fred Foster talk him into trying vocals on the old Weavers song **Gotta Travel On**.

Les Paul had spent years on the radio as a hillbilly guitar picker named Rhubarb Red and as a studio jazz guitarist before he and his wife, Mary Ford, began to hit the big time with jazzy versions of standards like **Bye Bye Blues**. Rusty Draper had worked nightclubs, radio, TV and theater before he did **Gambler's Guitar** in 1953; later he appeared, like Gordon MacRae, in musical comedy and TV shows like *Rawhide* and *Laramie*.

—Charles K. Wolfe

13. **Just Born (To Be Your Baby)** Perry Como • Music and lyrics by Luther Dixon and Billy Dawn Smith. RCA Victor 7050 (1957). Backup vocals by the Ray Charles Singers. Courtesy of BMG Music.
14. **Sweet and Gentle** Alan Dale • Music by Ottilio Portal, English lyrics by George Thorn. Coral 61435 (1955).
- X 15. **A Kiss to Build a Dream On** Louis Armstrong • Music and lyrics by Bert Kalmar, Harry Ruby and Oscar Hammerstein II. Decca 27720 (1952).
- X 16. **And So to Sleep Again** Patti Page • Music and lyrics by Joe Marsala and Suvny Skylar. Mercury 5706 (1951). Under license from PolyGram Special Products, a Division of PolyGram Group Distribution, Inc.
- X 17. **Vanity** Don Cherry • Music by Guy Wood, lyrics by Jack Manus and Bernard Bierman. Decca 27618 (1951).
- X 18. **Bye Bye Blues** Les Paul and Mary Ford • Music and lyrics by Bert Lown, Chauncey Gray, David Bennett and Fred Hamm. Capitol 2316 (1953). Courtesy of Capitol Records, Inc., under license from CEMA Special Markets.
19. **The Happy Whistler** Don Robertson • Music by Don Robertson. Capitol 3091 (1956). Courtesy of Capitol Records, Inc., under license from CEMA Special Markets.
- X 20. **Allez-Vous-En** Kay Starr • Music and lyrics by Cole Porter. Capitol 2464 (1953). Courtesy of Capitol Records, Inc., under license from CEMA Special Markets.
21. **Why Don't They Understand** George Hamilton IV • Music and lyrics by Jack Fishman and Joe Henderson. ABC-Paramount 9862 (1958).
22. **Chain Gang** Bobby Scott • Music and lyrics by Sol Quasha and Herb Yakus. ABC-Paramount 9658 (1956).
23. **Gotta Travel On** Billy Grammer • Music and lyrics by Paul Clayton, Larry Ehrlich, Dave Lazer, Fred Hellerman, Peter Segal, Lee Hays and Ronnie Gilbert. Monument 400 (1959). Courtesy of Sony Music Special Products.
- X 24. **Anywhere I Wander** Julius La Rosa • Music and lyrics by Frank Lesser. Cadence 1230 (1953). Courtesy of Barnaby Records, Inc., by arrangement with Celebrity Licensing, Inc.

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- 1 **Crazy 'Bout Ya Baby** The Crew-Cuts
- 2 **Hey Joe!** Frankie Laine
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- 5 **I Understand** The Four Tunes
- 6 **The Breeze and I** Caterina Valente
- 7 **Gambler's Guitar** Rusty Draper
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- 9 **Mambo Italiano** Rosemary Clooney
- 10 **From the Vine Came the Grape** The Gaylords
- 11 **Blue Velvet** Tony Bennett
- 12 **Endlessly** Brook Benton
- 13 **Just Born (To Be Your Baby)** Perry Como
- 14 **Sweet and Gentle** Alan Dale
- 15 **A Kiss to Build a Dream On** Louis Armstrong
- 16 **And So to Sleep Again** Patti Page
- 17 **Vanity** Don Cherry
- 18 **Bye Bye Blues** Les Paul and Mary Ford
- 19 **The Happy Whistler** Don Robertson
- 20 **Allez-Vous-En** Kay Starr
- 21 **Why Don't They Understand**
George Hamilton IV
- 22 **Chain Gang** Bobby Scott
- 23 **Gotta Travel On** Billy Grammer
- 24 **Anywhere I Wander** Julius La Rosa



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