

THE '50s FOREVER



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The close harmonies of the Four Freshmen influenced many vocal groups, including the Beach Boys.



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As in any other age, the great pop stylists of the 1950s had a special affection for their first big success, the song that sent them on their way to stardom. One such singer was Tony Bennett, and his career began with a haunting tango, **The Boulevard of Broken Dreams**. Bennett began featuring the song, which came from a 1934 film called *Moulin Rouge*, when he did his first real tour, with Bob Hope, in the late 1940s. "The success was enormous," he recalls, "so much so that Mitch Miller, who was the head of A&R at Columbia at the time, contacted my then-manager, Ray Muscarella."

Bennett chose *Boulevard* for his first—and only—try-out record and on April 17, 1950, cut it at his first Columbia session. He was so confident about its success that he told his mother to quit her job; in fact, after the disc was released 10 days later, it sold well enough to get Bennett a string of dates in the Midwest and in cities like Buffalo, Cleveland and Detroit.

Another career-starter was **Wonderful! Wonderful!** for Johnny Mathis in 1957. Born in California in 1935, John Royce Mathis was a track star in high jumping at San Francisco State College in 1955 before he was signed to Columbia Records. He had just received an invitation to try out for the 1956 Olympics when he was finally called to New York to cut his first records.

"I had just finished an album of very pyrotechnical jazz-oriented songs," he recalled. Then he was given *Wonderful! Wonderful!*, but he was dubious. "[It] had none of the fireworks of any of the stuff I had done previously on records, so I didn't have much hope for it." Released early in 1957, the single spent over half the year

on the charts and proved that his silky ballad style was O.K. by listeners.

Just as dubious about a hit-to-be was Les Paul, who with Mary Ford produced **I'm Sitting on Top of the World** in 1953. This was by no means the duo's first big hit—they had been regulars on the charts since 1951, when they did *How High the Moon*. Introduced in 1928 by the original "jazz singer," Al Jolson, *I'm Sitting* had become a standard by the 1950s. Paul got the idea for his version one night when a chauffeur, driving the couple from their home in Mahwah, New Jersey, into New York City, took a long way around, going up Riverside Drive. When Paul complained about the route, the driver explained, "It makes me feel like I'm sitting on top of the world."

A few days later Paul and Ford recorded the piece in their home studio, where Paul made most of his technically complex sides. "Mary sang 'I'm settin' instead of 'I'm sittin,' but I thought she did it so well, it didn't matter," recalled Paul. "The biggest problem was with my equipment. It was down for some reason, and the distortion couldn't have been any worse.... So I hesitated to even put it out." Finally, Paul realized the record's potential and let Capitol issue it.

Besides studio wizardry, Paul had a solid background as a jazz guitarist, and in this he was typical of many of the pop singers of the 1950s. Jazz during this decade was not as esoteric as it would become, and many superb jazz artists appeared on the hit parade. Indeed, the nation's most famous jazz club, New York's Birdland, was celebrated in **Lullaby of Birdland**. Written by pianist



George Shearing, the piece became a standard among jazz musicians. The 1956 recording by the French vocal group Blue Stars (led by future cabaret singer Blossom Dearie) was about the only version of the easy-swinging lullaby that got on the charts, though.

By coincidence, another jazz hit of the era appeared in an LP titled *Lullabies of Birdland*; here the singer was Ella Fitzgerald, whose career dated back to the 1930s, when she won fame as a teenager singing *A-Tisket A-Tasket* with Chick Webb's swing band. On **Smooth Sailing**, written by tenor sax player and band-

Specialists in Italian-American song, the Gaylords

leader Arnett Cobb, the Ray Charles Singers and a funky organ can't disguise the jazz underpinnings Ella displays as she cooks her way through the wordless vocal. Even Sammy Davis Jr., better known as a cabaret singer, presents an amazing barrage of scatting on his send-up of the old torch song **Love Me or Leave Me** (1955). Such bop singing had become popular with jazzmen in the late 1940s, but it took a master interpreter like Davis to translate it into a top hit.

Sultry, smoky-voiced Julie London was an actress in several low-budget movies and the onetime wife of *Dragnet*'s Jack Webb, but by 1956 she was married to jazz pianist Bobby Troup, who got her a contract with Liberty Records. Using a spare backup that included veteran guitarist Barney Kessel and bassist Ray Leatherwood, she created a version of Arthur Hamilton's **Cry Me a River** that forever after was associated with her—and became a model for hundreds of other club singers.

Sarah Vaughan, whose amazing range made her one of the most versatile singers of the age, began producing quality jazz albums on one hand and delicious pop singles on the other. **C'est La Vie** (1955) has a big string orchestra and slick arrangement but works mainly because of Sarah's phrasing and her unearthly vibrato.

For many, jazz harmony in the 1950s was exemplified by the Four Freshmen, an Indiana quartet featuring the lead singing of Bob Flanigan. They were discovered in 1950 by bandleader Stan Kenton, who helped them get a contract with his company, Capitol, and encouraged them to do a series of albums such as *Voices in Modern and Four Freshmen and Five Trombones*. Their hit singles, though, ran more to the teen-ballad style of **Graduation Day** (1956), their highest-charting hit. It was written by brothers Joe and Noel Sherman, who also penned Nat Cole's *Ramblin' Rose* and Perry Como's **Juke Box Baby**.

The '50s also saw a revival of interest in ragtime. Johnny Maddox, Del Wood, Crazy Otto, Joe "Fingers" Carr and others produced album after album of "honky-tonk" piano music, bringing back to life older songs and inspiring younger writers to have a go at these styles.

One result was **The Old Piano Roll Blues** (1950), a pastiche so clever that few people ever realized it was a new song by a 31-year-old composer named Cy Cohen, who lived on a houseboat in San Francisco. The artist here is Hoagy Carmichael, not only one of the century's greatest songwriters, creator of *Stardust*, *Georgia on My Mind* and many other standards, but also an accomplished singer whose midwestern, Bogart-like voice had graced hits ever since he recorded *Rockin' Chair* with Louis Armstrong in 1932. Here he is heard with Cass Daley and clarinet player Matty Matlock's Dixieland band, recapturing the feeling of those early days.

Throughout the 1950s, popular singers responded to the increasing challenge of rock 'n' roll with versatility and creativity. Classic crooners like Eddie Fisher and Perry Como, whose television shows gave them a nationwide platform, by 1956 were trying their hands at the new teenage music in songs like Fisher's **Dungaree Doll** and Como's *Juke Box Baby*. Over at Columbia, two Mitch Miller protégés, Guy Mitchell and Rosemary Clooney, turned to novelties like **Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania** (1952) and **Mangos** (1957). The latter, taken from a contemporary edition of the revue *Ziegfeld Follies*, became a Clooney favorite and a staple in her club acts, where she encouraged her audiences to join in.

The ethnic diversity of the new pop scene was reflected in the increasing number of foreign language hits. These included the Gayfords' **The Little Shoemaker** (1954) and Domenico Modugno's **Nel Blu Dipinto di Blu** (1958), widely known as *Volare*.

As ever, there were songs from Hollywood and Broad-

way, such as Doris Day's **I'll Never Stop Loving You** (1955), from her film biography of Ruth Etting, *Love Me or Leave Me*. **Honey-Babe** (1955), by Art Mooney, was an adaptation of an old folk song and was used as a "jody," or cadence-counting song, in the movie *Battle Cry*. Ray Bolger and Ethel Merman, two of the brightest of Broadway stars, collaborated on **Dearie** (1950), from the *Copacabana Show of 1950*. And Frankie Laine's **A Woman in Love** (1955) served to remind everyone of the richness of Frank Loesser's classic music for *Guy*s and *Dolls*.

—Charles K. Wolfe



DISCOGRAPHY

1. **Dungaree Doll** Eddie Fisher • *Music by Sherman Edwards, lyrics by Ben Raleigh. RCA Victor 6337 (1956). Courtesy of BMG Music/ The RCA Records Label, under license from BMG Direct Marketing, Inc.*
- X 2. **I'm Sitting on Top of the World** Les Paul and Mary Ford • *Music by Ray Henderson, lyrics by Sam M. Lewis and Joe Young. Capitol 2400 (1953). Courtesy of Capitol Records, Inc., under license from CEMA Special Markets.*
3. **Nel Blu Dipinto di Blu (Volare)** Domenico Modugno • *Music by Domenico Modugno, lyrics by Domenico Modugno and F. Migliacci. Decca 30677 (1958). Licensed by Nuova Fonit Cetra SPA-Italy.*
4. **A Woman in Love** Frankie Laine • *Music and lyrics by Frank Loesser. Columbia 40583 (1955). Under license from Sony Music Special Products, a Division of Sony Music Entertainment, Inc.*
5. **Cry Me a River** Julie London • *Music and lyrics by Arthur Hamilton. Liberty 55006 (1955). Courtesy of EMI Records Group/EMI Records, under license from CEMA Special Markets.*
6. **Love Me or Leave Me** Sammy Davis Jr. • *Music by Walter Donaldson, lyrics by Gus Kahn. Decca 29484 (1955).*
- X 7. **Bermuda** The Bell Sisters • *Music and lyrics by Cynthia Strother and Eugene R. Strother. RCA Victor 4422 (1952). Courtesy of BMG Music/ The RCA Records Label, under license from BMG Direct Marketing, Inc.*
- X 8. **The Boulevard of Broken Dreams** Tony Bennett • *Music by Harry Warren, lyrics by Al Dubin. Columbia 38825 (1950). Under license from Sony Music Special Products, a Division of Sony Music Entertainment, Inc.*
9. **C'est La Vie** Sarah Vaughan • *Music and lyrics by Edward R. White and Mack Wolfson. Mercury 70727 (1955). Under license from PolyGram Special Markets, a Division of PolyGram Group Distribution, Inc.*
10. **The Day the Rains Came** Jane Morgan • *Music by Gilbert Becaud, English lyrics by Carl Sigman. Kapp 235 (1958).*
- X 11. **Don't Forbid Me** Pat Boone • *Music and lyrics by Charles Singleton. Dot 15521 (1957).*
12. **Graduation Day** The Four Freshmen • *Music and lyrics by Joe Sherman and Noel Sherman. Capitol 3410 (1956). Courtesy of Capitol Records, Inc., under license from CEMA Special Markets.*
13. **Honey-Babe** Art Mooney and Vic Greenberg • *Music by Art Mooney and Vic Greenberg. Decca 29484 (1955).*



Jane Morgan went from classical vocal studies at Juilliard to stardom in Europe before she became known in America.

Steiner, lyrics by Paul Francis Webster. MGM 11900 (1955). Under license from PolyGram Special Markets, a Division of PolyGram Group Distribution, Inc.

14. Mangos Rosemary Clooney • Music by Dee Libbey, lyrics by Sid Wayne. Columbia 40835 (1957). Under license from Sony Music Special Products, a Division of Sony Music Entertainment, Inc.

15. Wonderful Wonderful Johnny Mathis • Music by Sherman Edwards, lyrics by Ben Raleigh. Columbia 40784 (1957). Under license from Sony Music Special Products, a Division of Sony Music Entertainment, Inc.

16. Lullaby of Birdland Blue Stars • Music by George Shearing, lyrics by B. Y. Forster. Mercury 70742 (1956). Under license from PolyGram Special Markets, a Division of PolyGram Group Distribution, Inc.

X **17. Smooth Sailing** Ella Fitzgerald • Music and lyrics by Arnett Cobb. Decca 27693 (1951).

X **18. The Old Piano Roll Blues** Hoagy Carmichael and Cass Daley • Music and lyrics by Cy Coben. Decca 24977 (1950). With Matty Matlock's All Stars.

19. Juke Box Baby Perry Como • Music and lyrics by Joe Sherman and Noel Sherman. RCA Victor 6427 (1956). Backup vocals by the Ray Charles Singers. Courtesy of BMG Music/The RCA Records Label, under license from BMG Direct Marketing, Inc.

X **20. The Little Shoemaker** The Gaylords • Music by Rudi Reuil, English lyrics by Geoffrey Parsons and John Turner. Mercury 70403 (1954). Under license from PolyGram Special Markets, a Division of PolyGram Group Distribution, Inc.

X **21. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania** Guy Mitchell • Music and lyrics by Bob Merrill. Columbia 39663 (1952). Under license from Sony Music Special Products, a Division of Sony Music Entertainment, Inc.

X **22. Dearie** Ray Bolger and Ethel Merman • Music and lyrics by Bob Hilliard and Dave Mann. Decca 24873 (1950).

23. Thank You Pretty Baby Brook Benton • Music and lyrics by Clyde Otis and Brook Benton. Mercury 71478 (1959). Under license from PolyGram Special Markets, a Division of PolyGram Group Distribution, Inc.

24. I'll Never Stop Loving You Doris Day • Music by Nicholas Brodsky, lyrics by Sammy Cahn. Columbia 40505 (1955). Under license from Sony Music Special Products, a Division of Sony Music Entertainment, Inc.

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12. **Graduation Day** The Four Freshmen
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14. **Mangos** Rosemary Clooney
15. **Wonderful! Wonderful!** Johnny Mathis
16. **Lullaby of Birdland** Blue Stars
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