

THE FUN-TIME '50s & '60s



TIME
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MUSIC



Gordon MacRae and Jo Stafford

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Many of the great novelty and nonsense songs were products of the big-band era; it was the late 1930s and early 1940s that yielded the likes of *The Hut-Sut Song* and *Mairzy Doats*. But with the 1950s, a new generation of irreverent, pun-laden tunes came forth—sometimes penned by the same composers who provided love ballads for Perry Como or lullabies for Patti Page. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, these songs reminded everybody that, when all is said and done, pop music is supposed to be fun.

The Thing (not to be confused with the science fiction movie of the same name) was popularized by archetypal Southerner and radio star Phil Harris. It was written by Charles Grean, a studio bass player for RCA's Chicago studios who had recorded with country artists like Hank Snow and Chet Atkins. Grean borrowed a melody from a rowdy folk song called *The Tailor's Boy* and fitted it with a plot about a mysterious box. Issued on both the standard 78 and the new 45 discs, Harris' version sold 400,000 in two weeks and eventually made it to No. 1 in 1950.

The publisher of **If I Knew You Were Comin' I'd've Baked a Cake**, anxious to interest someone in recording it, got some friends to sing it over a Chicago *Breakfast Club* radio show. The ploy worked, and half a dozen publishers were soon bidding for it. Eileen Barton, a veteran radio singer and second banana to Milton Berle, got the nod and cut it for the independent National label. Her infectious performance became a favorite and added a new phrase to the '50s vocabulary.

I Said My Pajamas (And Put On My Pray'rs), by crooner Tony Martin and band singer Fran Warren, used

the old vaudeville trick of word inversion to make its point. A similar duet is **Go to Sleep, Go to Sleep, Go to Sleep**, in which radio personality Arthur Godfrey talks his way to sleep with stage star Mary Martin.

Since the '30s, filmmaker Walt Disney had been a source for some of the hit parade's most engaging tunes. By the 1950s, the Disney studios were in full swing, experimenting with animation and "live-action" and breaking ground in television. *Cinderella* was the first major animated feature of the decade, and for it Disney personally journeyed to New York to look for writers who could create songs for it.

While there, he kept hearing a song on the radio by Perry Como called *Chi-Baba, Chi-Baba*, and liked it. Disney arranged a meeting with its composers—the team of Mack David, Jerry Livingston and Al Hoffman—all veterans of the New York scene. Livingston recalled that they played a medley of their hits for Disney, but things kept coming back to *Chi-Baba*. "I think he had in mind something similar for the fairy godmother's magic scene." The result was **Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo**, which ultimately was nominated for an Academy Award. Among the numerous versions of it was one by Jo Stafford and Gordon MacRae, who had been paired by Capitol executives for a series of duets in the late 1940s.

In 1957 the Disney studios sought to follow their success with Davy Crockett by creating a new hero, a masked swordsman who dressed in black. With Guy Williams in the title role, **Zorro** began as a weekly television series, then moved to a regular spot on the series *Disneyland*. The theme song was co-authored by Disney staff musi-

cian George Bruns, who had been responsible for the Davy Crockett theme. Producer Archie Bleyer apparently achieved the “swishing” sword effect on the Chordettes’ recording by running a drumstick over a canvas bass fiddle case.

Another Disney crew was responsible for 1965’s **Super-cali-frigil-istic-expi-ali-docious**. Richard and Robert Sherman were brothers who had written dozens of songs for films and TV shows by the time Disney assigned them to his newest project, *Mary Poppins*. “It gave us the chance to write music and lyrics with an English ‘folk’ and ‘music hall’ flavor,” recalled Richard Sherman.

One of the first songs they tried was one about the longest word they had ever heard. “When we were little boys in summer camp in the Adirondack Mountains in the mid-1930s, we heard this word. Not the exact word, but a word very similar.... It gave us kids a word that no adult had...we wanted the Banks children [in the film] to have that same feeling.” On Julie Andrews and Dick Van Dyke’s version, Richard Sherman assisted as part of “the Pearlle Chorus.”

The popular cartoon character mouse Speedy Gonzales made his debut for Warner Brothers in 1953, and by the time Pat Boone recorded **Speedy Gonzales** in 1962, the name had become generic for Latin stereotypes. Composer Buddy Kaye provided this account of a world where the cantina gives green stamps with tequila.

Many novelties, such as **Beans in My Ears**, have a folkslike simplicity that invites anybody to sing along; others, such as Leroy Van Dyke’s **Auctioneer**, are so full of tongue-twisting lines that only their original singers would dare try them. A college graduate with a major in animal husbandry, Van Dyke modeled the song on his cousin, a livestock auctioneer in Missouri. “I wrote the song about 1953, when I was stationed in Korea,” Van Dyke said. “I had a 15-minute segment on a USO show just before Marilyn Monroe, when she performed for the 160th Infantry Regiment.”

Bad Stole de Wedding Bell (1954).

Folk and country singers have always had a soft spot in their hearts for the offbeat. The Grand Ole Opry’s Little Jimmy Dickens had one of his biggest sellers in 1965 with **May the Bird of Paradise Fly Up Your Nose**. Composer Neal Merritt was inspired to write the song one night in El Paso, where he was watching Johnny Carson quipping something like “May the bird of paradise lay a golden egg in Skitch Henderson’s beard.” “I thought, ‘What an idea for a song.’ So I sat down, picked up a guitar, had a couple of beers, and in about 20 minutes it was finished.”

The roots of Brook Benton’s **The Boll Weevil Song** (1961) go back to turn-of-the-century Texas, where the insect devastated cotton crops and caused the migration of hundreds of black sharecroppers. It was first popularized by folk singer Huddie Ledbetter (“Leadbelly”). **A Dollar Down** came from the repertoire of Cisco Houston, a singing pal of Woody Guthrie’s, while **The Marvellous Toy**, which sounds ages old, was actually a product of ’60s folk singer Tom Paxton.

—Charles K. Wolfe



Three years later, a talent scout for Dot Records heard Van Dyke sing the song on an amateur show in Chicago and rushed him into a Chicago studio to set it down. Audiences—and disc jockeys—were spellbound. “They’d never heard anything like it. And I didn’t have many trying to cover it. The average person can’t sing it.”

Sometimes the sheer sound of a record is enough to give it a wacky appeal. In 1963 Rolf Harris, a native of Perth, Australia, who had moved to England when he was 22, introduced American fans to **Tie Me Kangaroo Down, Sport**, which had been unleashed on the British public three years before. Everybody was soon talking about the odd sound that opened the record, a sound Harris called “wobbling.” It was created by shaking a piece of warped Masonite board. Combined with the unusual Australian allusions in the lyrics, the “wobbling” soon gave Harris a following not only in the States and in England but even in Australia.

More kangaroos graced 1962’s **My Boomerang Won’t Come Back**. Charlie Drake was a Londoner who carved a career in radio and TV after a stint in the Royal Air Force; his boomerang song was first released in England. A minor controversy erupted over Drake’s reference, in the original version, to being “black” in the face. A second version dubbed in the word “blue.”

“Skiffle” folk singer Lonnie Donegan’s ersatz Cockney accent made **Does Your Chewing Gum Lose Its Flavor** into a top-10 hit in 1961. Donegan—actually a Scotsman—specialized in resurrecting older songs such as *Rock Island Line*, and he found the source for his chewing gum opus in a 1924 vaudeville song. His new version became a hit in England in 1958, but it wasn’t until 1961 that it caught on in the States. Even sophisticated Eartha Kitt was not beyond trying a dialect tune, as when she adopted a Jamaican persona in **Somebody**



Eileen Barton

DISCOGRAPHY

- 1. The Thing** Phil Harris • *Music and lyrics by Charles R. Grean. RCA Victor 3968 (1950). Courtesy of BMG Music/The RCA Records Label, under license from BMG Direct Marketing, Inc.*
- 2. Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo** Jo Stafford and Gordon MacRae • *Music and lyrics by Mack David, Al Hoffman and Jerry Livingston. Capitol 782 (1950). Courtesy of Capitol Records, Inc., under license from CEMA Special Markets.*
- 3. If I Knew You Were Comin' I'd've Baked a Cake** Eileen Barton • *Music and lyrics by Al Hoffman, Bob Merrill and Clem Watts. National 9103 (1950). Courtesy of Denon/Nippon Columbia Co., Ltd.*
- 4. I Said My Pajamas (And Put On My Prayers)** Tony Martin and Fran Warren • *Music and lyrics by Eddie Pola and George Wyle. RCA Victor 3613 (1950). Courtesy of BMG Music/The RCA Records Label, under license from BMG Direct Marketing, Inc.*
- 5. Somebody Bad Stole de Wedding Bell (Who's Got de Ding Dong?)** Eartha Kitt • *Music by Dave Mann, lyrics by Bob Hilliard. RCA Victor 5610 (1954). Courtesy of BMG Music/The RCA Records Label, under license from BMG Direct Marketing, Inc.*
- 6. Auctioneer** Leroy Van Dyke • *Music and lyrics by Leroy Van Dyke and Buddy Black. Dot 15503 (1957).*
- 7. In the Middle of the House** Rusty Draper • *Music and lyrics by Bob Hilliard. Mercury 70921 (1956). Backup vocals by the Jack Halloran Singers. Under license from PolyGram Special Markets, a Division of PolyGram Group Distribution, Inc.*
- 8. Zorro** The Chordettes • *Music and lyrics by Norman Foster and George Bruns. Cadence 1349 (1953). Courtesy of Barnaby Records, Inc., by arrangement with Celebrity Licensing Inc.*
- 9. (Bazoom) I Need Your Lovin'** The Cheers • *Music and lyrics by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller. Capitol 2921 (1954). Courtesy of Capitol Records, Inc., under license from CEMA Special Markets.*
- 10. Daddy-O** The Fontane Sisters • *Music and lyrics by Louie Innis, Buford Abner and Charlie Gore. Dot 15428 (1955).*
- 11. Black Strap Molasses** Danny Kaye, Jimmy Durante, Jane Wyman and Groucho Marx • *Music and lyrics by Carmine Ennis and Marilou Harrington. Decca 27748 (1951). Backup vocals by 4 Hits and a Miss.*
- 12. Go to Sleep, Go to Sleep, Go to Sleep** Mary Martin and Arthur Godfrey • *Music by Fred Spielman, lyrics by Sammy Cahn. Columbia 38744 (1950). Under license from Sony Music Special Products, a Division of Sony Music Entertainment, Inc.*
- 13. Does Your Chewing Gum Lose Its Flavor (On the Bedpost Over Night)** Lonnie Donegan and His Skiffle Group • *Music by Ernest Breuer, lyrics by Billy Rose and Marty Bloom. Dot 15911 (1961).*
- 14. Speedy Gonzales** Pat Boone • *Music and lyrics by Buddy Kaye, Ethel Lee and David Hill. Dot 16368 (1962). Backup vocal by Robin Ward.*
- 15. Dance Everyone Dance** Betty Madigan • *Music and lyrics by Sid Danoff. Adapted from the song Hava Nagila. Coral 62007 (1958).*
- 16. My Boomerang Won't Come Back** Charlie Drake • *Music and lyrics by Max Diamond and Charlie Drake. United Artists 398 (1962). Courtesy of EMI Records, Ltd., under license from CEMA Special Markets.*
- 17. Tie Me Kangaroo Down, Sport** Rolf Harris • *Music and lyrics by Rolf Harris. Epic 9596 (1963). Courtesy of EMI Records, Ltd., under license from CEMA Special Markets.*
- 18. Delaware** Perry Como • *Music and lyrics by Irving Gordon. RCA Victor 7670 (1960). Backup vocals by the Ray Charles Singers. Courtesy of BMG Music/The RCA Records Label, under license from BMG Direct Marketing, Inc.*
- 19. A Dollar Down** The Limelites • *Music and lyrics by Cisco Houston. RCA Victor 7859 (1961). Courtesy of BMG Music/The RCA Records Label, under license from BMG Direct Marketing, Inc.*
- 20. May the Bird of Paradise Fly Up Your Nose**
"Little" Jimmy Dickens • *Music and lyrics by Neal Merritt. Columbia 43388 (1963). Under license from Sony Music Special Products, a Division of Sony Music Entertainment, Inc.*
- 21. The Boll Weevil Song** Brook Benton • *Music and lyrics by Clyde Otis and Brook Benton. Mercury 71820 (1961). Backup vocals by the Mike*



Stewart Singers. Under license from PolyGram Special Markets, a Division of PolyGram Group Distribution, Inc.

22. The Marvelous Toy The Chad Mitchell Trio • *Music and lyrics by Tom Paxton. Mercury 72197 (1964). Under license from PolyGram Special Markets, a Division of PolyGram Group Distribution, Inc.*

23. Beans in My Ears The Serendipity Singers • *Music and lyrics by Len H. Chandler Jr. Philips 40198 (1964). Under license from PolyGram Special Markets, a Division of PolyGram Group Distribution, Inc.*

24. Super-cali-fragil-istic-expi-ali-docious Julie Andrews, Dick Van Dyke and the Pearlies • *Music and lyrics by Richard M. Sherman and Robert B. Sherman. Vista 434 (1965). Courtesy of Buena Vista Pictures Distribution, Inc.*

Phil Harris

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