

1956



TIME
LIFE
MUSIC

Perry Como



The story of 1956's most surprising hit began three years earlier, on June 1, 1953, when a car from the Tennessee State Penitentiary at Nashville pulled up to Sam Phillips' Sun Recording Studio in Memphis. Inside were five inmates led by a tenor and songwriter named Johnny Bragg, a group calling themselves the Prisonaires. Discovered and brought to Sun by a pair of country music promoters, the group began to rehearse that day while their guards went next door to Taylor's Cafe to have coffee.

One of the numbers they sang was an original by Bragg called **Just Walking in the Rain**, a gospel-like love song the group did unaccompanied. Their work finished, the Prisonaires returned to their cells in Nashville, and six weeks later saw the fruits of their labor issued on Sun 78s, some pressed in red vinyl with black prison stripes. Their record sold fairly well, and Bragg—who later became friends with another Sun artist, Elvis Presley—brought his group back for more recordings and eventually won a parole for his efforts.

Three years later, Columbia A & R man Mitch Miller heard about *Just Walking* through his Nashville contacts, which he had been systematically mining for country songs that could be recast as pop singles. Miller secured the song and took it to Johnnie Ray, who had had a smash with *Cry* in 1951 but was having trouble finding a follow-up.

Ray was skeptical at the recording session. "I was trying to keep a straight face. We had four backup singers and a professional whistler. The whistler whistled and we kept messing around. Finally Mitch came out and said, 'Okay, let's get serious. This one could be a big one.'" It was, of course. *Just Walking in the Rain* renewed Ray's career, en-

riched Bragg (who was back in prison in 1956 after parole violation) and charmed music fans everywhere.

Bragg's song was only one of several hits in 1956 that originated in out-of-the-way places, far from the traditional centers such as Hollywood, Broadway or Tin Pan Alley. Another was Guy Mitchell's **Singing the Blues**. It was born in the sleepy Ozarks foothills hamlet of Drasco, Arkansas, the product of a high-school boy named Melvin Endsley. Endsley had gotten interested in writing country music while undergoing treatment for polio at the Crippled Children's Hospital in Memphis in the late 1940s. He completed the song in July 1954, performed it on local radio and eventually borrowed enough money to come to Nashville and pitch it to country star Marty Robbins.

Robbins liked it, got Endsley a contract with his publishers, Acuff-Rose, and recorded the song in late 1955. Country fans loved it, and at once Mitch Miller arranged for Guy Mitchell to do a pop cover of it, one modeled closely on Robbins', and again using a professional whistler. The result sold three million copies and stayed at the top of the charts for more than two months.

Then there was **The Green Door**, which put Jim Lowe, a 29-year-old songwriter and disc jockey from another Ozarks town, Springfield, Missouri, at the top. This No. 1 song was inspired by the yellow door of a club in Dallas and by the boys who would linger outside it because they didn't have union cards to get in with. Lowe, who was working at WNBC in New York, recorded *Green Door* there, and Charlie Green, an RCA Victor studio musician, brought the completed master to Dot Records president Randy Wood.

Dot had already mined another Texas source a few months earlier when Wood had Pat Boone, the Nashville singer who had become adept at doing pop-styled covers of rhythm and blues hits, cut a chart-topping version of **I Almost Lost My Mind**. It had come from black Texas songwriter-singer Ivory Joe Hunter, who had had an R & B smash with it in 1950. These two No. 1 sellers made Dot one of the leading independent labels and a major voice in the year's music.

Few people realized the odd pedigree of Elvis Presley's **Love Me Tender**. Supposedly the first record to have advance sales of over a million, *Love Me Tender* was based on *Aura Lee*, a Civil War favorite that was later adapted as a graduation song at West Point and called *Army Blue*. The song was hastily rewritten for Elvis to use in his first film (of the same name), and though the lyrics he actually sang in the film were different from those heard on the record, no one seemed to mind. *Love Me Tender* became the first Elvis song to appeal to the adult pop music audience of the 1950s and the one that showed parents across the land that Elvis "could really sing" when he wanted to.

Better recording technology and more elaborate home playback systems were introducing 1956's music fans to "the land of hi-fi," and two of the year's No. 1 discs reflected this trend with lush orchestrations and innovative arrangements. Nelson Riddle, whose backup work for Nat King Cole had won him fame, enjoyed his own first hit with **Lisbon Antigua**. The tune (also known as *In Old Lisbon*) had been published in Portugal in 1937.

Les Baxter, a former tenor sax player who had backed Billie Holiday, was one of the most innovative arrangers of the 1950s and had his million-selling follow-up to *April in Portugal* and *Unchained Melody* with **The Poor People of Paris**. As originally written in 1954 and popularized by French chanteuse Edith Piaf, the song was titled *The Ballad of Poor John*. But when Capitol Records' talent scout in France cabled the information to Hollywood, the French title was garbled in transmission,

began his career with lugubrious Italian love songs, branched out with the easy-riding **Memories Are Made of This**, by folk singer Terry Gilkyson.

Nineteen fifty-six also saw Vic Damone rejuvenate his career with the classic Broadway stylings of **On the Street Where You Live**, from the great musical *My Fair Lady*, which opened in March of that year. And youngsters like Jerry Vale (**You Don't Know Me**) and Cathy Carr (**Ivory Tower**) showed that these established older styles still had plenty of life in them, and that the mainstream pop tradition was still in good hands.

— Charles K. Wolfe

DISCOGRAPHY

1. **The Green Door** Jim Lowe • Music by Bob Davie, lyrics by Marvin Moore. Backup vocals by the High Fives. Dot 15486. Courtesy of MCA Records, Inc
2. **Rock and Roll Waltz** Kay Starr • Music by Shorty Allen, lyrics by Roy Alfred. RCA Victor 6359. Courtesy of BMG Music



ronywood, the French title was garbled in transmission, and *Four Join* ("Jeai") came out *Four People* ("gens"). In the confusion, the mistaken title stuck to the song, even after Baxter had recorded it.

As ever, Hollywood produced its share of great music in 1956. **Picnic**, the film version of William Inge's play, starred Kim Novak and William Holden and featured an original theme by George Duning and TV personality Steve Allen. However, the film's musical director, Morris Stoloff, juxtaposed the new music with a version of an old 1930s Benny Goodman Quartet favorite, **Moonglow**. Stoloff's record, with himself on piano, made a memorable medley of the two.

The Academy Award for best song in 1956, though, went to Doris Day's **Whatever Will Be, Will Be (Que Sera, Sera)**. Designed for the Alfred Hitchcock remake of his *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, the song initially disappointed Doris Day. "It's a kiddie song," she told her husband. "I was hoping it would be more than that." Her husband replied, "Hitchcock and I both think it's going to be a big hit. You'll see." She did, and came away with a new respect for Hitchcock as a music critic.

In a year when rockers like Elvis turned to dreamy ballads, it was not surprising to see established crooners try their hands at up-tempo efforts. Such was the case with Perry Como's **Hot Diggity (Dog Ziggity Boom)**. Cascading xylophones and rattling snare drums did little to disguise the fact that the melody was adapted from a theme in Emmanuel Chabrier's rhapsody *España* of 1883, but Como's zestful delivery showed his versatility with faster material. Former big-band singer Kay Starr, who had already scored with lilting hits like *Wheel of Fortune* and *Side by Side*, broke out with **Rock and Roll Waltz**, which managed to appeal to both teenagers and their parents.

The Chordettes, who had started off as an all-girl barbershop quartet, moved into a little livelier territory with **Born to Be with You**. The recording featured a subtle calypso beat, in tribute to another musical fad of the mid-1950s. Even Dean Martin, who



The Chordettes

3. Just Walking in the Rain Johnnie Ray • *Music and lyrics by Johnny Bragg and Robert S. Riley. Columbia 40729. Courtesy of CBS Special Products.*

4. The Wayward Wind Gogi Grant • *Music and lyrics by Stan Lebowsky and Herb Newman. Era 1013. Courtesy of Sizemore Music.*

5. More Perry Como • *Music by Tom Glazer, lyrics by Alex Alstone. Backup vocals by the Ray Charles Singers. RCA Victor 6554. Courtesy of BMG Music.*

6. Moonglow and Theme from "Picnic" Morris Stoloff • *Moonglow music and lyrics by Will Hudson, Eddie DeLange and Irving Mills; Theme from "Picnic" music by Steve Allen and George Duning. Decca 29888. Courtesy of MCA Records, Inc.*

7. Whatever Will Be, Will Be (Que Sera, Sera) Doris Day • *Music and lyrics by Jay Livingston and Ray Evans. Columbia 40704. Courtesy of CBS Special Products.*

8. Canadian Sunset Andy Williams • *Music by Eddie Heywood, lyrics by Norman Gimbel. Cadence 1297. Courtesy of Barnaby Records, Inc.*

9. Allegheny Moon Patti Page • *Music and lyrics by Al Hoffman and Dick Manning. Mercury 70878. Under license from PolyGram Special Products, a Division of PolyGram Records, Inc.*

10. Standing on the Corner The Four Lads • *Music and lyrics by Frank Loesser. Columbia 40674. Courtesy of CBS Special Products.*

11. Memories Are Made of This Dean Martin • *Music and lyrics by Terry Gilkyson, Richard Dehr and Frank Miller. Capitol 3295. Courtesy of Capitol Records, Inc., under license from CEMA Special Markets.*

12. Love Me Tender Elvis Presley • *Music and lyrics by Elvis Presley and Vera Matson. Adapted from Aura Lee by George R. Poulton and W. W. Foadick. RCA Victor 6643. Courtesy of BMG Music.*

13. Hot Diggity (Dog Ziggity Boom) Perry Como • *Music and lyrics by Al Hoffman and Dick Manning. Adapted from Chabrier's España. Backup vocals by the Ray Charles Singers. RCA Victor 6427. Courtesy of BMG Music.*

14. Born to Be with You The Chordettes • *Music and lyrics by Don Robertson. Cadence 1291. Courtesy of Barnaby Records, Inc.*

15. On the Street Where You Live Vic Damone • *Music by Frederick Loewe, lyrics by Alan Jay Lerner. Columbia 40654. Courtesy of CBS Special Products.*

16. Lisbon Antigua Nelson Riddle and His Orchestra • *Music by Raul Portela. Capitol 3287. Courtesy of Capitol Records, Inc., under license from CEMA Special Markets.*

17. You Don't Know Me Jerry Vale • *Music and lyrics by Cindy Walker and Eddy Arnold. Columbia 40710. Courtesy of CBS Special Products.*

18. My Prayer The Platters • *Music by Georges Boulanger, music and English lyrics by Jimmy Kennedy. Mercury 70893. Under license from PolyGram Special Products, a Division of PolyGram Records, Inc.*

19. Singing the Blues Guy Mitchell • *Music and lyrics by Melvin Endsley. Columbia 40769. Courtesy of CBS Special Products.*

20. I Almost Lost My Mind Pat Boone • *Music and lyrics by Ivory Joe Hunter. Dot 15472. Courtesy of MCA Records, Inc.*

21. Ivory Tower Cathy Carr • *Music and lyrics by Jack Fulton and Lois Steele. Fraternity 734. Courtesy of Janus Records, Inc.*

22. After the Lights Go Down Low Al Hibbler • *Music and lyrics by Alan White and Leroy Lovett. Decca 29982. Courtesy of MCA Records, Inc.*

23. The Poor People of Paris Les Baxter with His Chorus and Orchestra • *Music by Marguerite Monnot. Capitol 3336. Courtesy of Capitol Records, Inc., under license from CEMA Special Markets.*

24. No, Not Much! The Four Lads • *Music by Robert*



24. No, Not Much! The Four Lads • Music by Robert
Allen, lyrics by Al Stillman. Columbia 40629.
Courtesy of CBS Special Products.



Dean Martin

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