

THE UNFORGETTABLE '50s



TIME
LIFE
MUSIC

Frankie Laine



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One of the most distinctive pop vocals of the 1950s had its origin not in Hollywood or Tin Pan Alley but in a dusty trailer park in eastern Tennessee. Don Gibson, a singer from Shelby, North Carolina, was working at nearby Knoxville radio station WNOX and trying his luck as a songwriter. In June 1957 his luck wasn't so good. One afternoon the 25-year-old Gibson was sitting alone in his house trailer watching two men repossess his TV and vacuum cleaner. "They started carrying things off, and I decided to write some songs because I felt so low and down," he recalled. Gibson grabbed his guitar and tape recorder and went to work.

Soon he had a song he called *Ole Lonesome Me*. Deciding it had possibilities, he sent it off to his Nashville publisher, Acuff-Rose. There the copyist assigned to transcribe the tape for sheet music misunderstood Gibson's singing and interpreted the title as **Oh Lonesome Me**. Gibson shrugged it off and went about trying to interest established country singers in the song; most found it too short or thought the rhythm too odd.

Finally, Gibson decided to record it himself, and on December 3, 1957, he put together a quartet of young studio musicians and went to the RCA studios. The drummer, Troy Hatcher from Knoxville, worked out a unique bass drum beat for the song, one he had borrowed from an arrangement by jazz saxophonist Coleman Hawkins. By February 1958, *Oh Lonesome Me* was released—on the flip side of another Gibson classic, *I Can't Stop Loving You*—and soon was on its way up both the country charts and the hit parade. It sold over 600,000 copies.

New styles of pop singing helped make the decade unforgettable. The warm, relaxed crooning of the great singers of

the 1940s—Crosby, Sinatra, Haymes—was still heard, but now there was the country style of Don Gibson and the intense belting style of performers like Johnnie Ray, Frankie Laine and Kay Starr.

Johnnie Ray, an Oregon native who was discovered in a Detroit club in 1951 and had an immense first hit with *Cry*, was aware of how his new sound differed from the old. "I've never considered myself a singer," he said. "I classify myself as a song stylist, a performer, a communicator and an actor. Right from the beginning, there was an awful lot of controversy. You were either pro-Johnnie Ray or you couldn't stand my guts!"

When Ray was nine, a playground accident had affected his hearing, and by the time he was 14 he was using a hearing aid to ward off deafness. With his love of Billie Holiday's jazz singing and a childhood diet of gospel music, Johnnie got work in numerous black nightclubs, and many listeners to his first records assumed he was black. On October 15, 1951, at the same session that produced *Cry*, Ray did **Here Am I—Broken Hearted**, accompanied by the Four Lads and ace guitarist Mundell Lowe. Though Ray was bothered by the fact that he sounded out of tune on some cuts, he admitted, "There was an electricity to that recording session that nobody could put their finger on." It was an electricity that ignited a career.

Frankie Laine, born Frank Paul LoVecchio in Chicago, had a style as distinctive as Ray's—so much so that his fans called him Mr. Rhythm. He spent almost 17 years, he recalls, "scuffling" at jobs with big bands and on radio (and learning his style from rhythm and blues singers and jazz arrangers) before he had his first pop hit in 1947 with

That's My Desire. By 1951, he had enjoyed a string of best-sellers, had started to become a television regular and had signed a lucrative new contract with Columbia.

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Another style that marked the new decade was the cool sound—a relaxed, laid-back, smoky manner derived from West Coast modern jazz. Chris Connor, from Kansas City, had already recorded with Stan Kenton when she turned to a solo career in 1953. Throughout the decade, she became known as a jazz singer, producing memorable albums with backing by giants like John Lewis and Zoot Sims. **I Miss You So** was one of her few charting singles, though she continued to perform and record into the 1990s.

A stylist with a similar jazz background was cabaret singer, pianist and songwriter Nina Simone. Growing up in a home full of gospel music, she attended Juillard in the early 1950s and signed a contract with the jazz label Bethlehem in 1959. One of her first releases was her version of **I Loves You, Porgy**, the standard from Gershwin's opera *Porgy and Bess*.

Exotic sounds appealed to many singers of the era. Harry Belafonte almost single-handedly popularized calypso music in the mid-1950s. His appearances onstage and on records led to his being cast in the 1957 film **Island in the Sun**. The title song was, like many Belafonte calypso hits, written with the help of "Lord Burgess," in reality a Long Island resident named Irving Burgie. Bongos, guitars and marimbas enhance the singer's dry, relaxed delivery.

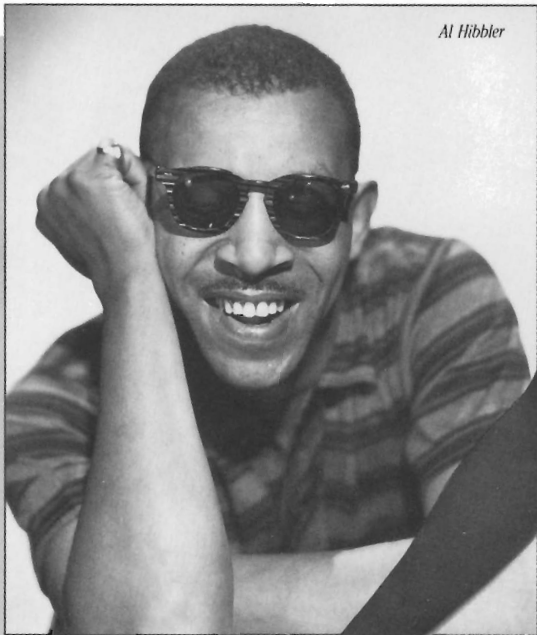
Though Eartha Kitt also dabbled in calypso, much of her apprenticeship was spent in Europe, where she headlined in clubs, appeared in French movies and played Helen of Troy in Orson Welles's stage version of *Faust*. With her cosmopolitan background, sexy manner and distinctive vibrato, Kitt could get away with recording songs partly in Turkish, French or Jamaican dialect. **C'est Si Bon**, her best-known song, helped launch a career that continued through the 1980s.

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Al Hibbler



Traditional vocal groups continued to flourish throughout the 1950s. Some carried on older styles, such as the De Joan Sisters, whose Dixieland-flavored **No More** hearkened back to the Andrews Sisters. The Ames Brothers, with showcases like **It Only Hurts for a Little While**, paid homage to the seasoned harmonies of the Mills Brothers and the Modernaires.

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The old crooning style of the 1940s was not entirely crowded out in the 1950s. Dean Martin's **I'll Always Love You**, Billy Eckstine's lush **I Apologize** and Don Rondo's **Two Different Worlds** showed its continued appeal. Fifties pop music embraced virtually all styles, and the result was variety and vitality in an unforgettable era.

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DISCOGRAPHY

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5. C'est Si Bon Eartha Kitt • *Music and French lyrics by Henri Betti. English lyrics by Jerry Seelen. RCA Victor 5358 (1953). Courtesy of BMG Music.*

6. Two Different Worlds Don Rondo • *Music by Al Frisch, lyrics by Sid Wayne. Jubilee 5256 (1956). Under license from Rhino Records, Inc., by arrangement with Butterfly Entertainment Corp.*

7. Istanbul (Not Constantinople) The Four Lads • *Music by Nat Simon, lyrics by Jimmy Kennedy. Columbia 40082 (1953). Under license from Sony Music Special Products, a Division of Sony Music Entertainment, Inc.*

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- 14. Jealousy (Jalousie)** Frankie Laine • Music by Frankie Laine, Gade, English lyrics by Vera Bloom. Columbia 39585 (1953). Under license from Sony Music Special Products, a Division of Sony Music Entertainment, Inc.
- 15. Half a Photograph** Kay Starr • Music by Hal Stanley, lyrics by Bob Russell. Capitol 2464 (1953). Courtesy of Capitol Records, Inc., under license from CEMA Special Markets.
- 16. Just One More Chance** Les Paul and Mary Ford • Music by Arthur Johnston, lyrics by Sam Coslow. Capitol 1825 (1951). Courtesy of Capitol Records, Inc., under license from CEMA Special Markets.
- 17. I Apologize** Billy Eckstine • Music and lyrics by Al Hoffman, Ed G. Nelson and Al Goodhart. MGM 10903 (1951). Under license from PolyGram Special Products, a Division of PolyGram Group Distribution, Inc.
- 18. Crying in the Chapel** June Valli • Music and lyrics by Artie Glenn. RCA Victor 5368 (1953). Courtesy of BMG Music.
- 19. Remember You're Mine** Pat Boone • Music and lyrics by Kal Mann and Bernie Lowe. Dot L5602 (1957). Courtesy of MCA Records, Inc.
- 20. No More** The De John Sisters • Music by Leo J. De John, lyrics by Julie De John and Duax De John. Epic 9085 (1954). Under license from Sony Music Special Products, a Division of Sony Music Entertainment, Inc.
- 21. Here Am I—Broken Hearted** Johnnie Ray • Music and lyrics by B. G. DeSylva, Lew Brown, Stephen W. Ballentine and Ray Henderson. Columbia 39636 (1952). Backup vocals by the Four Lads. Under license from Sony Music Special Products, a Division of Sony Music Entertainment, Inc.
- 22. It Only Hurts for a Little While** The Ames Brothers • Music by Fred Spielman, lyrics by Mack David. RCA Victor 648J (1956). Courtesy of BMG Music.
- 23. I Loves You, Porgy** Nina Simone • Music by George Gershwin, lyrics by Du Bose Heyward and Ira Gershwin. Bethlehem 11021 (1959). Courtesy of Bethlehem Records.
- 24. With These Hands** Eddie Fisher • Music by Abner Silver, lyrics by Benny Davis. RCA Victor 5365 (1953). Courtesy of BMG Music.

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The Author: Three-time Grammy nominee Charles K. Wolfe teaches English at Middle Tennessee State University. He has written numerous books and articles on country music and has also produced country and folk music recordings.

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