Popular Music

"Sublime" is not a word commonly associated with the popular music of the early 1950's, however, or the popular music of any era for that matter. Popular music was meant to entertain and to provide a brief escape from reality and a few memorable melodies to whistle or sing in the shower. Like all forms of "popular" entertainment, it was produced for mass consumption and meant to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. Before the swing era, hit songs came largely from the world of the musical theater, which developed out of the minstrel shows, music halls and vaudeville variety shows of the 19th and early 20th century, and grew into the glamour of Broadway musicals and Hollywood extravaganzas. The music was popularized by traveling troupes and sheet music sales, then took a quantum marketing leap with the arrival of radio broadcasts, jukeboxes, 78 r.p.m. recordings and other 20th century technologies that revolutionized pop culture, continuing into the 1950's with the advent of the 45 r.p.m. "single" and 33 1/3 r.p.m. "album" formats and the arrival of television, which grew up alongside rock & roll.

Popular hits of the first half of the 20th century were supplied by the songwriters of "Tin Pan Alley," who celebrated the boom years and Roaring Twenties and provided a dreamy escape from the harsh realities of the Depression and two World Wars.[i] Cole Porter, Hoagy Carmichael, Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, Rodgers & Hart, Jerome Kern and many other great writers left an indelible imprint on the popular imagination during the "Jazz Age," crafting memorable melodies and sly, literate turns of romantic phrases that were, indeed, sublime. For all the notable exceptions, however, the popular music industry was also cluttered—as it always is—with long-forgotten hacks cashing in on the latest fads and spewing out sentimental weepers and cute novelty numbers aimed at the bland tastes of the American mainstream.

The impetus of jazz and boogie-woogie in the thirties moved popular music away from the light entertainment offered by the publishing houses and toward a more exciting and dance-oriented style that made the swing era a true golden period. As the big bands died out, however, and the star singers again grabbed the spotlight, the professional songwriters found their services again in demand to provide material for a flood of new singers. (Unlike blues and country singers, popular singers rarely wrote their own material in the pre-rock eras.) Without the drive of jazz supporting it, and with post-war America too busy rebuilding lives and starting a baby-boom to waste time dancing, popular music turned back to lightweight sentimental songs and cute novelty music sung by smoothly polished voices and backed by sweetly generic instrumental arrangements. It would take the impetus of another black style–rhythm & blues–to put some fire back into the pop charts. In the meantime, the music industry's assembly line of songwriters, publishers, A&R men, arrangers, studio musicians, song-pluggers and record promoters worked overtime turning out pleasant entertainment that seemed to fit the comforting predictability of life in the most prosperous country in the world.

Not everyone shared in the prosperity, needless to say, but the 1950's *were* a good time to be a white, middle-class American. The post-war years brought an unprecedented prosperity and confidence to America and to a new generation of young people who couldn't remember the Great Depression (or, soon enough, even World War II). The popular music of the early 1950's mirrored life in mainstream America: bland, predictable and reassuring, which didn't seem at all bad after a devastating Depression and horrifying

war, at least not to the adults who lived through those hard years and now actually *enjoyed* listening to Perry Como, Patti Page, Doris Day, Teresa Brewer, Rosemary Clooney, Kay Starr, Dean Martin, Connie Francis, Fontane Sisters, McGuire Sisters, Lawrence Welk...

An unending stream of polite, popular white entertainers filled the fifties with music that sounded (and still sounds) either charming or nauseating, depending largely on your age. A subculture called "teenagers" was forming in the midst of the Eisenhower America, united by a vague feeling of boredom and by an undercurrent of restless energy that had no outlet—certainly not in the popular music their parents enjoyed, which seemed as bland and wholesome as the family homilies of *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* and the single beds in *I Love Lucy*. After all, the #1 song of 1953 was Patti Page's treacly "Doggie in the Window"(!)

Only **Johnny Ray** and, to a lesser extent, Frankie Laine ("That's My Desire") seemed to sing with anything approaching the level of feeling the black singers took for granted. In fact, Johnny Ray was at first mistaken for black, even by black record buyers, who sent his 1951 hit "Cry" to the #1 spot on the R&B charts. The overt emotion of Ray's singing and live theatrics caused quite a sensation, as this *New York Times* review attests: "Ray sings like a man in an agony of suffering. Drenched in tears... His hair falls over his face. He clutches at the microphone and behaves as if he were about to tear it apart. His arms shoot out in wild gesticulations and his outstretched fingers are clenched and unclenched."[ii]

Ray's overwrought histrionics sounds a bit laughable now, but it was enough to make him positively thrilling in the early fifties. (When Elvis hit, Ray was the only white precedent that came to most minds.) Most of the popular music of the era was made up of virtually interchangeable singers and arrangements, as demonstrated every week on *Your Hit Parade*. This popular fifties show gave audiences the chance to see all of the week's best-selling songs sung by a nondescript group of singers backed by a nondescript studio band, with the occasional appearance of an actual star to sing his or her nondescript hit in person. The appearance of rock & roll caused big problems, however, as the show's cast of white-bread singers and band members were forced to make some sense of "Rock Around the Clock"—which hit #1 on the pop charts and thus had be dealt with—and all the subsequent rock & roll hits that refused to be kept in their place.

Your Hit Parade finally went off the air in 1959, after several years of embarrassing attempts to deal with the popularity of a music that flew in the face of the guiding principal of the show and of popular music in general: that the *Song* sells, not the *Singer*. While the individual styles of the popular singers varied from the cool croon of Perry Como to the hyper-emotion of Johnny Ray, popular music clung to the basic idea that fed the publishing companies through the years of sheet music and piano rolls and parlor songs: the idea that what really counted was the song, not the specific "rendition" of the song, however pleasing it might be. Rock & roll turned this equation on its head and placed the Singer above the Song and declared that the "genuine article" was not a lifeless piece of sheet music to be "interpreted" but was, instead, the individually-etched *performance* and persona that brought the song to life and was thereafter inseparable from the song itself. The sound and feel of rock & roll were certainly as important as the notes and words. Imagine "Tutti Frutti" reduced to sheet music! (Refer to Pat Boone's

cover for the results...) Clearly that sound and feel came from somewhere beyond the horizons of "Que Sera Sera." That "somewhere" was rhythm & blues.

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[i]The term "Tin Pan Alley" referred loosely to the theater and publishing districts in New York, but was more a catchall term for the publishing and musical entertainment business in general.
[ii]David Ewen, "All the Years of American Popular Music" (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1977), p. 535