

VIC DAMONE
(1928–2018)

This month's essay is about a singer of the post-World War II era who died last year at the age of 89. He was a traditional pop and big band singer, actor, radio and television presenter, and entertainer. His intimate, rhapsodic voice captivated bobby soxers, middle-aged dreamers, and silver-haired romantics in a five-decade medley of America's love songs and popular standards. He is best known for his performances of songs such as "[Again](#)" (his first of two Gold Records that hit #6 on the charts); "[You're Breaking My Heart](#)" (his only #1 hit on the charts and his second Gold Record). Two of his other hits made it to #4 on the charts: "[On the Street Where You Live](#)" (from My Fair Lady) and "[My Heart Cries for You](#)."



Vic Damone was born Vito Rocco Farinola in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn on June 12, 1928, the only boy of his parents' five children. His parents, Rocco and Mamie Damone Farinola, were Italian immigrants from Bari, Italy. Rocco was an electrician who also sang and played guitar; Mamie taught piano. But Vito's musical awakening and inspiration came from his favorite singer, Frank Sinatra, who was a decade older than he, and whom he wished to emulate. In order to become a serious singer, Vito began taking voice lessons. He sang in the choir at St. Finbarr's Church in Bath Beach, Brooklyn, for Sunday Mass with organist Anthony Amorello; he also performed in school talent shows.

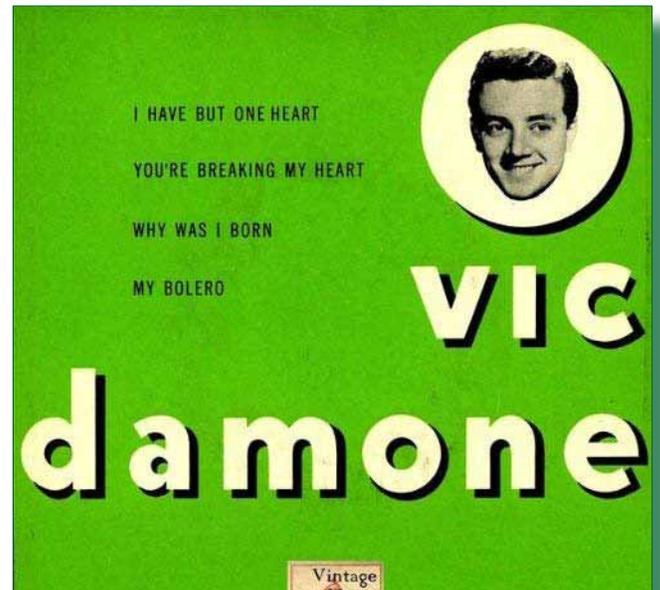
Vito attended Lafayette High School in Brooklyn and also worked delivering groceries from the age of 12. When his father was injured at work, Vito had to drop out of high school to help support his family. He got a job as an usher and elevator operator at the Paramount Theater in Manhattan. One night, while taking the up-and-coming Perry Como, who was performing at the Paramount at the time, up to his dressing room, Vito stopped the elevator between floors and asked Como to hear him sing and whether or not he should continue voice lessons. Impressed with what he heard, Como said, "Keep singing!" and referred him to a local bandleader. From that point on, Como became a lifelong friend and mentor to the singer. (Years later, Damone would name his only son "Perry" after his friend).

With Como's encouragement, he took his mother's maiden name to attempt a singing career as "Vic Damone." With more lessons, he expanded his range and became adept at singing the fashionable ballads of the day. As he described it: "Sure, I copied Sinatra—who didn't?"

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Damone entered the talent search on Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts radio program and won 1st place in April 1947. This led to his becoming a regular on Godfrey's show and gigs on local radio broadcasts. While on the set of the Godfrey show, he met Milton Berle, who helped him get gigs at two prominent nightclubs-- La Martinique and the Aquarium. He was a hit, and he was soon back at the Paramount, singing with Stan Kenton's orchestra. His popularity quickly soared and in a short period of time, the 19-year old had signed a contract with Mercury Records.

His debut single released on Mercury was "[I Have But One Heart](#)," which he sang in Italian and in English; it reached #7 on the Billboard chart. His second recording, "You Do" (released November 1, 1947), also reached #7 on the charts. This was followed by a duet with Patti Page, "Say Something Sweet to your Sweetheart" that reached #23 on the charts. These hits were followed by his first runaway smash in 1949, "Again." It was his first Gold Record and reached #6 on the charts. This was followed immediately by his second Gold Record and (his only #1 hit on the charts), "You're Breaking my Heart." It was based on the aria, "Mattinata" by Ruggero Leoncavallo (1904). Many of these chart hits, like "I Have But One Heart" and "You're Breaking My Heart," were reboots (with English lyrics added) of the Italian songs Damone's immigrant father had played around the house.



Following these smash hits, he continued to record more hits that made it to the charts. Some of these were: "My Bolero" (#10); "Four Winds and Seven Seas" (#16); "Why Was I Born?" (#20); "Tzena, Tzena, Tzena" (#7); and "Can Anyone Explain (No! No! No!)" (#25). Overall, he had 15 chart hits in the first three years (1947 through 1949) of his Mercury contract, none of which was lower than #27 on the charts and five were in the top 10. Such popularity garnered him his own weekly radio show in 1948 on NBC- "Saturday Night Serenade."

In 1950, Damone signed a film contract with MGM. This led to two movie appearances, neither of which was memorable. He played Frenchman Andre Milan in the musical *Rich, Young and Pretty* (1951) with Jane Powell; he played himself in the musical *The Strip* (1951) with Mickey Rooney and Louis Armstrong.

Damone was drafted into the military in late 1950, and served in the United States Army from 1951 to 1953. (He served with future Northwest Indiana radio personality Al Evans and coun-

try music star Johnny Cash). During his tour of duty, he entertained the troops in Germany and appeared on the American Forces Network (AFN) radio station. Before reporting for active duty, he recorded a number of songs that Mercury released over the time he was serving. Several of these scored high on the charts: “Here in My Heart” (#8), Les Baxter’s “April in Portugal” (#10), “Ebb Tide” (#10), and the Charlie Chaplin-penned “Eternally” (#12).

When he returned from the military, he resumed his film career and over the next two years, he appeared in several movies: *Athena* (1954), starring with Jane Powell and Debbie Reynolds; *Deep in My Heart* (1954) a cameo appearance that starred José Ferrer, Helen Traubel, and Merle Oberon; *Kismet* (1955) that was directed by Vincente Minelli and also starred Howard Keel, Ann Blythe, and Dolores Gray (he and Ann Blyth sang “Stranger in Paradise”); and *Hit the Deck* (1955) that also starred Jane Powell, Tony Martin, Debbie Reynolds and Ann Miller. He also appeared on [Milton Berle’s TV show](#).

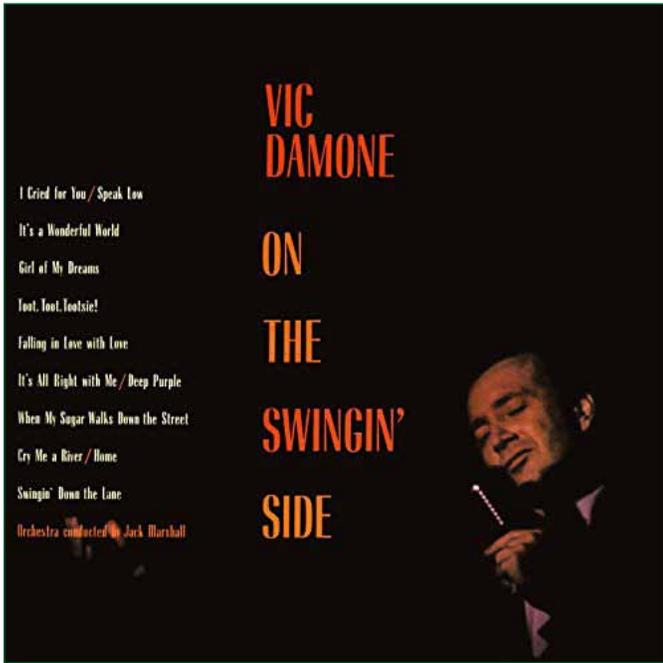


However, his run of hit singles was coasting to a stop. So, when Mercury dropped him in 1955, he followed his former Artists and Repertoire (A&R) man Mitch Miller to Columbia. The following year he scored his first hit there, “On the Street Where You Live” (from *My Fair Lady*) which climbed to #4 on the US chart (his final top 10 recording), and even hit #1 on the UK singles chart. Also that same year, his LP album “That Towering Feeling” reached the chart for albums.

He even got to host his own show on CBS, *The Vic Damone Show*, which lasted during seasons 1956 and 1957. It was a summer replacement show for *December Bride*. During 1956 it was a 30-minute show; in 1957 it was expanded to one hour. It gave Damone the opportunity to sing solos and to perform with musical friends.

He was initially able to dodge the rock’n’roll bullet of the mid-1950s, but his career momentum soon ground to a near halt. He had only one more Top 20 single, 1957’s “[An Affair to Remember \(Our Love Affair\)](#),” which reached #16. He did not have the charisma to ride over the changing tastes like Sinatra nor did he want to sing rock’n’roll. As a result, he was eventually forced to try to recreate his image as a “cover” artist, interpreting other artists’ songs geared for the adult audience, and concentrating his recording efforts on albums.

The consistency of his albums did improve, with the most notable result being 1961's *On the Swingin' Side*, but Columbia let Damone move over to Capitol afterward. Hoping that Damone could ease some of the sting of losing Sinatra when he abruptly left to help found Reprise Records, Capitol coaxed some of his strongest LPs out of him, including 1962's ro-



mantic *Linger Awhile with Vic Damone* and *The Lively Ones*. Both charted in the Top 100, but failed to win the audience of, for example, latter-day Sinatra. Capital released him in 1965, and Damone moved on to Warner Bros. for just one album, *You Were Only Fooling*. The title cut, “You Were Only Fooling Me (While I was Falling in Love),” gave him his final Top 40 hit pop single, reaching #30 on the Billboard chart in 1965 (and #8 on the Adult Contemporary chart). After that, his days on the charts were practically over. Warner Bros. also persuaded him to record Tom Jones’ single hit, “It’s Not Unusual” but his heart was not in it. It didn’t become a hit.

In 1966, he switched record labels again, moving to RCA Victor and releasing four albums *Stay with Me*, *Why Can’t I Walk Away*, *On the South Side of Chicago*, and *The Damone Type of Thing*. In 1969, he released his last US chart hit record, “To Make A Big Man Cry,” which made the Adult Contemporary chart at #31.

Damone did limited acting on television in the early 1960s. He played Stan Skylar in the 1960 episode “Piano Man” on CBS’s *The DuPont Show with June Allyson*. He was cast as Jess Wilkerson in the 1961 episode “The Proxy” on the ABC Western series *The Rebel*, starring Nick Adams. He played the crooner Ric Vallone in the 1962 episode “Like a Sister” on the CBS sitcom *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. In the summers of 1962 and 1963, Damone hosted a television variety series on NBC called *The Lively Ones*, which showcased current jazz, pop, and folk performers, as well as comedians.

His other notable television work during this time included three guest appearances from 1963 to 1964 on CBS’s *The Judy Garland Show*, where in addition to his solo performances, Garland and he sang duet medleys of songs from *Porgy and Bess*, *West Side Story* and *Kismet*. In 1967, he hosted *The Dean Martin Summer Show*, which was rerun in 1971. He also was a guest on several British television shows, one of which was an appearance on *The Tommy Cooper Hour Christmas Special* in 1974.

In 1971, Damone started playing Las Vegas casinos as a performer, and although he had to declare bankruptcy in the early 1970s, he earned enough as a casino performer to clear up his financial difficulties. He extended his geographical range, touring through the United States and the United Kingdom, and as a result of his popularity, he decided to record some albums again for RCA.

In 1972, Francis Ford Coppola offered him the role of Johnny Fontane in *The Godfather I*. The role ultimately went to Al Martino because Damone turned it down for a variety of reasons. Publicly, he stated that he thought the film was “not in the best interests of Italian-Americans.” Other reasons reportedly included his thinking the role did not have enough screen time or did not pay enough, but there also could have been the fear of provoking the mob and Sinatra, whom Damone profoundly respected.

Damone subsequently enjoyed a steady career touring nightclubs and casinos around the country, and experienced something of a renaissance in Britain during the early 1980s. He capitalized with extensive touring there, and also cut a few new albums for RCA during the first half of the decade.

DAMONE AND THE MOB

Thanks to the postwar ascent of a number of popular Italian-American singers—Sinatra, Tony Bennett, Dean Martin, Perry Como—pop music had taken on a distinctly Neapolitan flavor. There was also a more complicated way that Southern Italy maintained a grip on the postwar music industry. As soon as he established himself on the pop charts, Damone tried as much as he could to avoid contact with the mob. But he knew that if he wanted to move up from just recording chart-hits to performing in big-time clubs and casinos, like the Copacabana in New York, the Flamingo in Las Vegas, the Beachcomber in Miami Beach—“classy” joints whose proprietorship was never in doubt, he couldn’t avoid contact with mobsters. As he said in his 2009 autobiography, *Singing Was the Easy Part*: “If you were an entertainer in those days, you automatically performed at Mob-owned places. There weren’t that many other clubs for you to go to.”

When he was first starting out in big-club engagements, he called Sinatra to ask for some business advice and to request a recommendation to several clubs Sinatra had played because Sinatra was at the height of his career. Sinatra took the call and then told Damone: “Vic, talk to Sam.” Then he passed the phone to Sam Giancana, the Chicago mob boss, who was Sinatra’s houseguest at the time.

In his autobiography, Damone also told about breaking his wedding engagement to a

mobster's daughter because she had insulted his mother. She had balked at accepting his mother's recipe for manicotti! This led to his being dangled headfirst out a 14th-floor window, his feet held by the girl's enraged father. His life was spared when, during a Mafia meeting to determine Damone's fate, New York mob boss, Frank Costello (*at right*), gave the classic thumbs-up in his favor. But the threat didn't go away. More than a decade later, Robert Kennedy, then US Attorney General, approached him at Peter Lawford's house to get information on his jilted fiancée's father. Of course, he took the wise course and didn't say anything.



LATER YEARS

In June, 2000, while he was working on his farewell concert tour, Damone suffered a mild stroke that he said was caused by severe dehydration and exhaustion. After a respite, he recovered sufficiently to undertake the farewell tour the following year, which included performances at Carnegie Hall and the Hollywood Bowl. After the tour, he pretty much went into retirement from actively performing and recording, although he did release one final album in 2002. Other albums were repackaged and re-released around this time and later (which are still available through on-line record stores). One of his final public performances was on January 19, 2002, at the Raymond F. Kravis Center for the Performing Arts in Palm Beach, Florida.

In 2003, he decided to release more previously unreleased material and formed Vintage Records with his son, Perry Damone (who was named after Perry Como). He planned to release a seven-CD series called *The Vic Damone Signature Collection*, and in May, 2003 released Volume 1, produced by Perry and Frank Sinclair. In May 2004, he released Volume 2 in the Signature Series, again produced by Perry and Sinclair, and decided to limit the collection to these two already-released CDs.

He garnered new fans following the 2002 launch of the “Vic Damone website”—www.vicdamone.com, created by Perry and Sinclair, and ultimately managed by his son-in-law William “Bill” Karant.

He stepped out of his retirement on January 22, 2011, for his final performance. He once again performed at the Kravis Performing Arts Center in Palm Beach, to a sold-out crowd. He dedicated the performance to his six grandchildren, who had never seen him perform. He stated that “I don't need the money...But, you know, my six grandkids have never seen me on stage.

It will be the first time. I will introduce them. It's going to be exciting for me. Before I die, I want them to have heard me perform at least once."

PERSONAL LIFE

He was married five times. In 1954, he married actress Pier Angeli, and they were divorced in 1958. She had previously been in a well-publicized relationship with James Dean, but left him to marry Damone, a move that garnered great media attention. Six years after divorcing Angeli, Damone was arrested on October 15, 1964 on Angeli's charge that he had kidnapped their 9-year-old son Perry from New York to Los Angeles. He was released three hours later after having pled "not guilty" to being a fugitive from a kidnapping charge. At the same time, a Santa Monica, California judge awarded him custody of Perry. However, Angeli ultimately gained custody of Perry and left Hollywood for her native Italy, taking Perry with her. Perry returned to California after Angeli's suicide in 1971 and subsequently worked with his father (see above). Perry ultimately died of lymphoma on December 9, 2014 at age 59.

In 1963, Damone married Judy Rawlins, with whom he had three daughters, Victoria, Andrea, and Daniella. They were divorced in 1971, and she committed suicide in 1974.

In 1974, he married entertainer Becky Ann Jones. They were divorced in 1982.

In 1987, he married actress and singer Diahann Carroll (*at right*). The marriage, which Carroll admitted was turbulent, had a legal separation in 1991. The couple reconciled and came back together for a time, but ultimately divorced in 1996.



In 1998, he married Rena Rowan, née Irena Aurelia Jung. He had met his Polish-born wife in 1996. She had asked him to perform at an event to raise money for her Rowan House charity in Philadelphia, which provides housing for homeless single women with children. Rowan, a breast-cancer survivor, was a clothing distributor who co-founded the "Jones New York" apparel line in the mid-1970s. She suffered a stroke in 2011, and died on November 6, 2016 at home in Palm Beach, Florida, from complications of pneumonia, at the age of 88.

Vic Damone died from complications of a respiratory illness in Miami Beach, Florida on February 11, 2018 at the age of 89. He is buried at Our Lady Queen of Peace Cemetery in Palm Beach, Florida.

ASSESSMENT

One of the prototypical Italian-American crooners, Vic Damone parlayed a smooth, mellow baritone into big-time pop stardom from the post-World War II years through the end of the century. Early in his career, his inflection and phrasing were clearly indebted to Frank Sinatra, who once famously called him “the best set of pipes in the business.” His voice—capable of soaring comfortably, even movingly, into the higher emotional reaches demanded by the lushest pop standards—kept his audiences coming. Even after his “demotion” later in his career from the big, headliner rooms in Vegas to the “lounges,” Sinatra showed up, his Rat Pack cronies in tow, telling them they were all about to receive “a singing lesson.”

Overall, Damone’s style was softer than Sinatra’s and owed less to the elasticity of jazz, especially since he was a solo performer who never served an apprenticeship with a swing orchestra. Very much the heartthrob in his heyday, his repertoire relied heavily on romantic ballads, though he did sprinkle in the occasional pop novelty song or Italian folk song. In all, he recorded over 2,000 songs during his career, many of which are still available on CD and LP albums.

Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from:

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