

PERRY COMO
(1912-2001)

This month's essay looks at the life of another Italian-American popular music artist of the post-World War II era. Famous for his relaxed vocals, cardigan sweaters, and television Christmas specials, he was the charming Italian-American whose name became synonymous with "mellow" as he performed through seven decades, starting in the 1930s. His idol, Bing Crosby, once called him "the man who invented casual."



PIERINO RONALD "PERRY" COMO was born on May 12, 1912 in Canonsburg, Pennsylvania. (This month would have been his 107th birthday, and, coincidentally, the 18th anniversary of his death). He was the seventh of 13 children and the first American-born child of Pietro Como and Lucia Travaglini, who had both immigrated to the United States in 1910 from Palena, a small town in the Province of Chieti in the Abruzzo region of Italy. (He used to point out to people that he was the seventh son of a seventh son and that this was a good omen in Italian culture). Like many children of Italian immigrants (including my own father), Perry did not begin speaking English until he entered school, since the Comos spoke only Italian at home. Pietro had bought a second-hand organ for \$3 soon after they had arrived in America. As soon as Perry was able to toddle, he would head to the instrument, pump the bellows, and play *by ear* music he had heard. Pietro worked in the Standard Tin Plate factory in Canonsburg, a small town in the coal-mining region that was located 18 miles southwest of Pittsburgh. The town had much in common with the Abruzzo region he had left: it was a place where people toiled long and hard in physically demanding jobs.

Pietro was an amateur baritone who sang in local amateur groups when he had the time. Although Pietro's circumstances were so meager that he had to buy food on the installment plan, he found the money to give music lessons to each of his children. Ultimately, Perry learned to play many different instruments, but he never had a voice lesson. He showed his musical talent in his teenage years as a trombone player in the town's brass band; he also played guitar, sang at weddings, and was an organist at his local church. In addition, he was a member of the Canonsburg Italian Band along with bandleader Stan Vinton, who was the father of singer Bobby Vinton. He also played in other Italian street bands that were common throughout Washington County. This musical exposure meant that, unlike many singers of his generation, he could read music.

Young Como started helping his family economically at age ten, working before and after school sweeping out Steve Fragapane's barber shop for 50¢ a week. He quickly learned how to strop razors and lather brushes; and by age 13, after practicing on his father for several months, young Perry had mastered the skills of barbering well enough to have his own chair in the Fragapane shop—although he had to stand on a box to tend to his customers!

Despite his musical ability, Como's primary ambition was to become the best barber in Canonsburg. When he was 14 years old, one of his regular customers, who owned a Greek coffee house that included a barber shop area, asked the young barber whether he would like to take over that portion of his shop. Como had so much work after moving to the coffee house, he had to hire two barbers to help him. His customers worked mainly at the nearby steel mills. They were well-paid, did not mind spending money on themselves, and enjoyed Como's popular song renditions, including Italian favorites. He did especially well when one of his customers was getting married. The groom and his men would avail themselves of every treatment Como and his assistants had to offer. Como sang romantic songs as he barbered the groom, while the other two barbers worked on the rest of the groom's party. During the wedding preparation, the groom's friends and relatives would come into the shop with gifts of money for Como. He became so popular as a "wedding barber" in the Greek community that he was asked to provide his services in Pittsburgh and even in Ohio. Since his father was unable to work at about this time because of a heart condition, Perry and his brothers became the support of the household.



Perry Como giving his young son a haircut (undated photo).

In 1932, Como left Canonsburg, moving about 100 miles away to Meadville, Pennsylvania, where his uncle had a barber shop in the Hotel Conneaut. Meadville was about 80 miles from Cleveland, and was a popular stop on the itinerary for dance bands that worked up and down the Ohio Valley. One evening, Como and his girlfriend, Roselle, had gone with their friends to nearby Cleveland to enjoy themselves. Their good times took them to the Silver Slipper Ballroom where Freddy Carlone and his orchestra were playing. Carlone invited anyone who thought he might have talent to come up and sing with his orchestra. Young Perry was terrified, but his friends urged him and pushed him onto the stage. Carlone was so impressed with his performance that he immediately offered him a job.

Como was unsure if he should accept the offer Carlone had made, so he returned to Canonsburg to talk the matter over with his father. Perry expected his father would tell him to stay in the barber business, but to his surprise, the senior Como told him if he did not take this opportunity, he might never know whether or not he could be a professional singer. The decision also had to be made with an eye on finances: Como earned around \$125 per week from his barber shop while the job with Carlone paid only \$28 per week. Roselle was willing to travel with her future husband and the orchestra, but the salary was not enough to support two people on the road. Perry and Roselle were married in Meadville the following year, on July 31, 1933. Four days later, Como joined Freddy Carlone's orchestra and began working gigs with them. Roselle returned home to Canonsburg; her new husband would be on the road for the next 18 months.



Three years after joining the Carlone band, Como moved to the Ted Weems Orchestra and his first recording dates. Como and Weems met in 1936 while the Carlone orchestra was playing in Warren, Ohio. Perry initially did not take the offer to join Weems' orchestra. However, Freddy Carlone realized that it was the best move for his young vocalist, and urged him to sign with Weems, who was a far more famous bandleader. Art Jarrett had just left the Weems organization to start his own band, and Weems was in need of a vocalist. Como got a raise, since Weems paid him \$50 per week, and he also got his first chance for nationwide exposure. The Ted Weems Orchestra was based in Chicago and was a regular on *The Jack Benny Program* and *Fibber McGee and Molly*. The orchestra also had its own weekly national radio program on the Mutual Broadcasting System named *Beat the Band*.

It was at this time that the young Como acquired polish and his own style with the help of Ted Weems. Mutual's Chicago affiliate WGN radio threatened to stop carrying the Weems broadcasts from Chicago's Palmer House if Weems' new singer did not improve. Weems had recordings of some previous radio programs that Como had done with the orchestra, so one evening he and Perry listened to them after the show. Listening to his own singing on the recordings, Como was shocked to realize that he could not make out the lyrics to the songs he was singing. Weems told Como there was no need for him to resort to vocal tricks; what was necessary was to sing from his heart.

Como's first recording with the Ted Weems Orchestra was a novelty tune called "You Can't Pull the Wool Over My Eyes," recorded for the Decca Records label in May, 1936. During one of his early Decca recording sessions with the Orchestra, Weems was told to get rid of "that kid" (Como) because he sounded too much like Bing Crosby, who also recorded for Decca. Before Perry could reply, Ted Weems spoke up, saying that Como was part of the recording

session or it was over. By the time Como had been with Weems about a year, he was mentioned in a 1937 NBC Radio ad in *Life Magazine* for *Fibber McGee and Molly* as “causing cardiac flutters with his crooning!”

The Comos’ first child, Ronnie, was born in 1940 while the Weems Orchestra was working in Chicago. Como left the performance to be at his wife’s side even though he was threatened with dismissal if he did so. (Weems did not follow through on the threat). Though Perry was now making \$250 a week and travel expenses for the family were no problem, young Ronnie could not become used to a normal routine when they were unable to stay in one place for an extended period of time. The radio program *Beat the Band* did not always originate from Chicago, but was often done from locations such as Milwaukee, Denver or St. Louis, as the orchestra continued to play its own road engagements while being a part of the radio show cast. The Comos decided road life was no place to try raising a child, and so Roselle and Ronnie went back to Canonsburg.

Soon after, in late 1942, Como made the decision to quit the Ted Weems Orchestra when Weems left for military service, even if it meant giving up singing. He returned to Canonsburg, his family, and his barber trade, tired of life on the road without his wife and young son. He even received an offer to become a Frank Sinatra imitator, but refused, choosing to keep his own style. While he was negotiating for a store lease to re-open his barber shop, he received a phone call from Tommy Rockwell at General Artists Corporation, who had also represented Ted Weems. He also received many other calls that also brought offers, but he liked and trusted Rockwell, who was offering him his own sustaining (non-sponsored) CBS radio show and offering to get him a recording contract. This was especially appealing because it meant staying in one place (New York) with no more road tours. As he pondered the job offer, Roselle told him, “You can always get another barber shop if it doesn’t work out!” Until these offers came, Como did not really view singing as his career, believing his years with Carlone and Weems had been enjoyable avocations, but now it was time to get back to real work. Como said in a 1983 interview, “I thought I’d have my fun and [then] I’d go home to work.”

Perry went on the air for CBS on March 12, 1943. Rockwell’s next move was to book him into the renowned Copacabana Night Club (*at right*) for two weeks beginning on June 10, 1943. One week later he signed his first RCA Victor contract and three days after that cut his first record for the company, *Goodbye, Sue*. (It was the beginning of a 44-year professional relationship with RCA). He became a very successful performer in theater and night club engagements; his initial two weeks at the Copacabana in June stretched into August. There were even times when Frank Sinatra would ask Como to fill in for him at his Paramount Theater performances.



The crooning craze was at its height during this time and the “bobby soxer” and “swooner” teenage girls who were wild about Sinatra added Como to their list. A “swooners club” voted him “Crooner of the Year” in 1943. The line for admission to a Perry Como Paramount performance was three deep and wound around the city block. His popularity also extended to a more mature audience when he played New York’s Versailles Night Club. Following this engagement, when he returned to the Copacabana, the management placed “SRO-Swooning Ruled Out” cards on the tables.

Also in 1943, he signed a seven-year movie contract with 20th Century-Fox. Although none of his film appearances was notable, he made four films for Fox: *Something for the Boys* (1944), *March of Time* (1945), *Doll Face* (1945), and *If I’m Lucky* (1946). In addition he made *Words and Music* (1948) for MGM. He never appeared to be comfortable in films, feeling the roles assigned him did not match his personality.

In 1944 Como had his first hit record, *Long Ago and Far Away*, and in 1945 the first of his over a dozen million-selling hits, “Till the End of Time.” Among his other hits of the 1940s and 1950s were “If I Loved You” (1945), “I’m Always Chasing Rainbows” (recorded both in 1945 and 1946), “Temptation” (1945, two versions), “Some Enchanted Evening” (1949), “Don’t Let the Stars Get in Your Eyes” (1950), which was the first of his 14 number 1 records, and “Catch a Falling Star” (1957), for which he won a Grammy Award in 1958.



He also did a series of hit novelty songs during the 1940s and 1950s. These were described by one of his positive critics, Will Friedwald, in his 1990 book *Jazz Singing*, as “idiotic novelties.” They included some very popular tunes that Perry’s easy-going style made fun and memorable: “[Hubba Hubba](#)” (1946), “Chi-Baba Chi-Baba” (1947), “N’yot N’yow” (“The Pussycat Song” 1948), “Bibbidi Bobbidi Boo” (“The Magic Song” 1949), “Zing

Zing Zoom Zoom” (1950), “Chincherinchee” (1956), “Pa-paya-Mama” (1953), and the monster hit “[Hot Diggity \(Dog Ziggity Boom\)](#)” (1955).

With emphasis on these upbeat novelty tunes, Perry’s singing sometimes did not inspire much excitement from the critics, although many found much to praise in his interpretations of standards and Broadway show tunes. They pointed out that he seemed to do best when his minimalist technique could temper larger-than-life songs like “[If I Loved You](#)” from *Carousel*, and “Some Enchanted Evening” from *South Pacific*. His fans, however, loved pretty much every song he recorded or performed on radio or TV.

Between 1944 and 1950 Como starred in his own NBC radio show, [*The Chesterfield Supper Club*](#), which, from 1948 to 1950, was also televised. He also starred on TV in *The Perry Como Show* that ran for 10 years, beginning its broadcasting on CBS in 1950 and changing to NBC from 1955 to 1959. This show opened with its theme song “Dream Along with Me,” and also included the popular [“Letters, we get letters, we get stacks and stacks of letters”](#)—the musical introduction to a part of the program in which he sang songs his listeners had requested. Beginning in 1959, he served as host of the TV show *Kraft Music Hall*. He ultimately ended his weekly TV appearances in 1963 and thereafter, until 1992, only headlined occasional TV specials, usually Christmas shows.

On November 7, 1964, filming for a *Kraft Music Hall* Christmas TV show that was aired on [December 17, 1964](#) began at the Vatican. By special permission of Pope Paul VI, Como and his crew were able to shoot segments in the Vatican gardens and other areas where cameras had never been permitted before. The show featured the first television appearance of the Sistine Chapel Choir, and also the first time a non-choir member (Como) sang with them. The choir performed a Christmas hymn in Latin written by their director, Domenico Bartolucci, called “Christ Is Born,” as part of their presentation. Como asked his associate, Ray Charles (this is not the blind, African-American Jazz singer with the same name) to write English lyrics for the song, using it many times on both TV shows and on his Christmas albums.

Como’s final TV Christmas special was filmed in January, 1994 in Dublin’s Point Theatre before an audience of 4,500 people, including Irish President Mary Robinson and Como’s friend, the actress Maureen O’Hara. [Perry Como’s Irish Christmas](#) was a PBS production. Como, appearing aged and unwell, had the flu during the show which took four hours to record. At the show’s conclusion, he apologized to his Dublin audience for a performance he felt was not up to his usual standards. During his visit to Dublin, he also visited a barber shop called “The Como” on Thomas Street. The owners, lifelong fans who named their business in his honor, had sent photographs of the shop and letters to him inviting him to visit. Photos of Como with the barbers were framed in the shop. (“The Como” ultimately closed in 2002).

As far as night club appearances were concerned, Perry had not made a night club appearance since he had last appeared at New York’s Copacabana in 1944. He had had numerous offers, but working close to home and to his family in New York doing TV shows appealed more. He was able to get home at a decent hour, not at 2 or 3 am, which routinely happened when he was doing late shows at the Copacabana or other night clubs. Since the children were now grown, he finally decided to accept an engagement at the International Hotel in Las Vegas in June 1970. This also resulted in his first “live” album, *Perry Como in Person at the International Hotel, Las Vegas*. Ray Charles, whose Ray Charles Singers were heard with Como for over



35 years, formed a special edition of the vocal group for his Las Vegas opening. He continued to do periodic engagements in Las Vegas and Lake Tahoe, but he limited his night club appearances to Nevada clubs only.

Doing live performances again brought Perry a new sense of enjoyment. In May 1974, he embarked on his first concert appearance outside the United States, a show at the London Palladium for the Variety Club of Great Britain to aid children's charities. It was while performing here that he discovered what he had been missing during his long hiatus from live performances: the audience cheered for ten minutes after he walked onstage. At the show's conclusion, the ever "cool" and "casual" crooner sat in a chair, delightedly chatting back and forth with his equally delighted audience. Perry returned to the United Kingdom in November for a Royal Variety performance to benefit the Entertainment Artistes' Benevolent Fund with the Queen Mother in attendance.

Como was invited to visit Buckingham Palace the day after the show. At first, the invitation did not extend to his associates traveling and working with him, so he politely declined. When word got back to the Palace regarding the reason for his turning down the invitation, it was then extended to include all in the Como party and he wholeheartedly accepted the invitation. Soon after, he announced his first concert tour that began in the UK in the spring of 1975.

In 1982, President Ronald Reagan invited Perry Como and Frank Sinatra to entertain Italian President Sandro Pertini at a White House State Dinner when he made an official visit to the United States. President Pertini enjoyed their performance so much that he joined them in an impromptu singing of "Santa Lucia." Como and Sinatra reprised this routine the next year in California as part of the entertainment for Queen Elizabeth's royal visit. Perry was on the program by special request of the Queen.

In 1984 Como toured the United States with his *50th Anniversary Show*. Having spent most of his professional life in radio or recording studios and on television soundstages, he enjoyed doing these on-the-road live performances. Even after his 80th birthday in 1992, he continued the concert tours. Gone, however, were the cardigan sweaters which had been a staple of his weekly TV shows (he had actually hated having to wear these). Como now performed in a tuxedo, saying, "It shows respect for the audience." The return to live appearances also provided him with an opportunity to poke a little fun with his "Mister Nice Guy" image in a song Ray Charles and Nick Perito, who was his closest collaborator since 1963, wrote for him—"[If I Could Almost Read Your Mind.](#)"

PERSONAL LIFE

Roselle Belline Como was born in 1914 to French immigrant parents in Canonsburg. Like Perry, she came from a large family that was very devoted to their Roman Catholic faith. Also, like Perry, she had spoken her parents' native French at home until she learned English at school. She and Perry met in 1929 at a picnic on Chartiers Creek that attracted many young people from the Canonsburg area. Perry attended the cookout with another girl and did not spot Roselle until everyone was singing around the campfire and the gathering was beginning to break up. When it came Perry's turn to sing one final song, he chose "More Than You Know" with his eyes on Roselle for the entire song. That was it! They were married on July 31, 1933; Roselle was 19 and Perry was 21. Their marriage lasted until Roselle's death on August 12, 1988, just a few weeks after they had celebrated their 65th wedding anniversary. Perry was devastated by her death.



The Comos had three children. The oldest was Ronald, who was born in 1940. After he was born, the Comos were unable to have more children, so they adopted a girl (Therese) and another boy (David). Both Perry and Roselle raised their children with traditional, non-show business values. Also, because Perry believed his professional life and his personal life should be kept separate, he declined repeated interview requests from Edward R. Murrow's popular TV show *Person to Person* to visit his home and family with cameras and microphones. At the time of their father's death in 2001, Ronnie was living in South Bend, Indiana, Therese Como Thibadeau was living in Jupiter, Florida., and David was living in San Francisco, California.

AWARDS

Como received the Grammy Award for Best Vocal Performance by a Male (1959); five Emmy awards (1955-1959); a Christopher Award (1956); a Peabody Award shared with his good friend Jackie Gleason (1956); and a Kennedy Center Honor (1987). He was also inducted into the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences Hall of Fame (1990). Posthumously, he received the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award (2002), and he was inducted into the Long Island Music Hall of Fame (2006) (*left*). He also has the rare distinction of having three stars on the Hollywood Walk of Fame for his work in radio, television, and music.

Perry Como died in his sleep on May 12, 2001, at his home in Jupiter Inlet Colony, Florida, at the age of 88, six days before his 89th birthday, from complications arising from Alzheimer's disease. His funeral Mass took place at St. Edward's Catholic Church in Palm Beach, Florida. Both Perry and Roselle are buried at Riverside Memorial Park in Tequesta, Palm Beach County, Florida.



ASSESSMENT

Perry Como's enduring popularity flowed more from his personality than it did from the way he put a song across. He appeared on stage as low-keyed, unassuming, direct, and always relaxed. That was the way he was in real-life as well. The key to his popularity was comfort—everybody liked his non-threatening, easy-to-listen-to manner.

“I don't have a lot to tell the average interviewer,” Perry once told a reporter. “I've done nothing that I can call exciting. I was a barber. Since then I've been a singer. That's it.”



Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from:

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