

DEAN MARTIN
(1917-1995)

This month's essay discusses the life of one of the great Italian-American entertainers of the mid-20th century. His catalog of pop songs, his movie career, and his television shows were entertainment to millions of people in the post-World War II era, and gave Italian-Americans something to be proud of in the changing world. Unlike other Italian-American singers of his generation, Dean Martin always kept his Italian roots alive: his "[That's Amore](#)" was an all-time success, and he also sang a verse of his popular recording "[Return to Me](#)" in Italian. His effortless vocalizing has become modern shorthand for "cool," as evidenced by the use of his songs in films, television, and ad campaigns. He brought a slurred, insinuating sensuality to the intimate crooning style popularized by Bing Crosby and Perry Como. While he was never considered a pop-song style originator, once saying he "copied Bing Crosby 100 percent," he was the link between Crosby's and Como's relaxed crooning style and the soft, sultry side of Elvis Presley, who named him a boyhood idol, and whose ballad hits like Love Me Tender copied his bedroom-voiced diction.

Signed to Capitol Records in 1948, he had 40 singles on Billboard's charts between 1950 and 1969. Three of them—"That's Amore," 1953, "[Memories Are Made of This](#)," 1955, and "[Everybody Loves Somebody Sometime](#)," 1964 were million-sellers, and seven reached the Top Ten. Between 1964 and 1969, he released 11 albums that were certified "gold," for sales of more than 500,000 copies. All 11 were recorded for Reprise, a label founded by Frank Sinatra in which Martin was an investor.



DINO PAUL CROCETTI was born on June 17, 1917 in Steubenville, Ohio. His father, Gaetano Alfonso Crocetti (1894–1967), a barber, was born on December 5, 1894 in Montesilvano, a city and commune of the province of Pescara in the Abruzzo region of Italy. His mother, Angela Barra (1897-1966), was born in Steubenville, Ohio on December 18, 1897. Her parents had emigrated from Abruzzo as well. Dino's parents were married in Steubenville on October 25, 1914 and had two boys. Dino's older brother was William "Bill" Crocetti (1916-1968). For the citizens of Montesilvano, Dean Martin remained throughout his life "zi Dean," the son of the barber who left for America at the beginning of the 20th century. The town waited in vain for "Dino" to return to his father's native town. (Today, a town square in Montesilvano is dedicated to the modern hero of the town).

Like many children of Italian immigrants (including my own father), Dino's first language was Italian and he did not speak English until he started school at the age of five. He attended Grant Elementary School in Steubenville, where he was bullied for his broken English. As a

teenager, he took up playing the drums as a hobby. He eventually dropped out of Steubenville High School in the tenth grade because he thought he was smarter than his teachers. He went to work at several odd jobs, including working in local steel mills and, at age 15, he became an amateur welterweight boxer under the name “Kid Crochet.” (Of his 12 bouts, he once said that he “won all but 11”). His short prizefighting career earned him little apart from a broken nose (later straightened), a scarred lip, many broken knuckles (a result of not being able to afford tape used to wrap boxers’ hands), and a bruised body.

Dino gave up boxing to work as a roulette stickman and croupier in an illegal casino behind a tobacco shop, where he had once worked as a stock boy. He also dabbled in other illegal activities, including driving liquor across state lines during prohibition, selling lottery tickets, and acting as a bookie. His speakeasy/casino experience put him in contact with club owners, resulting in his first singing gigs.

At age 17, he began singing with local bands in nightclubs near his hometown, calling himself “Dino Martini” (after the Metropolitan Opera tenor Nino Martini). His big break came while he was working for the Ernie McKay Orchestra. He was noticed by Cleveland bandleader Sammy Watkins, who hired him as the band’s featured vocalist. He began touring with Watkins in 1938, and in 1940, he changed his name to “Dean Martin” at Watkins’ suggestion.



In October 1941, Martin married Elizabeth “Betty” Anne McDonald in Cleveland, Ohio, and the couple had an apartment in Cleveland Heights for a while. They eventually had four children before the marriage ended in 1949. Martin worked for various bands throughout the early 1940s, mostly on looks and personality until he developed his own singing style. It wasn’t all successes as he was starting out; he flopped at the Riobamba nightclub in New York, when he followed Frank Sinatra in 1943.

Martin met comic Jerry Lewis at the Glass Hat Club in New York, where both were performing. The two formed a fast friendship which led to their clowning around during each other’s acts. Together they formed a music-comedy team that debuted at Atlantic City’s 500 Club on July 24, 1946. The act featured Martin as a suave straight man and Lewis as an immature clown. The audience did not receive them well. The owner, Skinny D’Amato, warned them that if they did not come up with a better act for their second show that night, they would be fired. Shaken by the prospect of losing their job after only one night, they huddled together in the alley behind the club. They agreed to “go for broke,” dividing their act between songs, skits, and ad-libbed material. Martin sang and Lewis dressed as a busboy, dropping plates and making a shambles of Martin’s performance and the club’s decorum until Lewis was chased from the room as Martin pelted him with bread rolls.

They soon further developed the act using slapstick, reeling off old vaudeville jokes, and doing whatever else popped into their heads. The audience laughed and the formula brought

them success as a new-style singing/comedy act. This success led to a series of well-paying engagements on the Eastern seaboard, culminating at New York's famous Copacabana for a six-week engagement that was extended to 12 weeks, at a salary of \$5,000 a week. The act ultimately consisted of Lewis interrupting and heckling Martin while he was trying to sing,



with the two ultimately chasing each other around the stage. The secret, both said, was that they ignored the audience and played to each other.

On June 20, 1948 the team made its [television debut](#) on the first broadcast of Ed Sullivan's *The Toast of the Town* on CBS. (The show's title was later changed to *The Ed Sullivan Show*). The other guests appearing on that first show were composers Rodgers and Hammerstein. Hoping to improve their act on the show, the two hired young comedy writers Norman Lear and Ed Simmons to write their bits.

With the assistance of both Lear and Simmons, the two ultimately took their act beyond nightclubs. NBC broadcast a regular 30-minute radio comedy-variety program in 1949 (*The Martin and Lewis Show* beginning April 3, 1949, and ending July 14, 1953). That same year (1949), Martin and Lewis signed with Paramount producer Hal B. Wallis as

comedy relief in the movie *My Friend Irma*, their film debut. Their agent, Abby Greshler, negotiated one of Hollywood's best deals: although they received only \$75,000 between them for their films with Wallis and Paramount, they were free to do one outside film a year, which they could co-produce through their own York Productions.

They also controlled their club, record, radio, and television appearances, and through these they earned millions of dollars. In *Dean & Me*, Lewis called Martin one of the great comic geniuses of all time. They were friends, as well, with Lewis acting as best man when Martin remarried in 1949. But harsh comments from critics, as well as frustration with the similarity of Martin and Lewis movies, which producer Hal Wallis refused to change, led to Martin's dissatisfaction and frustration with working as a team. He desired to spread his own wings and develop more creativity in his performances. He put less enthusiasm into the work of the team, leading to escalating arguments with Lewis. Martin told his partner he was "nothing to me but a dollar sign." Martin and Lewis last performed together at the Copacabana in New York on July 24, 1956, ten years to the day from their first teaming together. As a team, they had participated in 16 motion pictures together, beginning with *My Friend Irma* (1949) and ending with *Hollywood or Bust* (1956). Martin once said that the two biggest turning points in his career were "meeting Jerry Lewis" and "leaving Jerry Lewis."

During Martin and Lewis' decade-long partnership, Martin had such hits as "Memories Are Made of This," "That's Amore," "Powder Your Face with Sunshine," and "You Belong to Me,"

among others, all for the Capitol label. When their partnership dissolved, showbiz pundits predicted Lewis' star would continue to rise and Martin's would fizzle. However, Martin confounded the skeptics. As a solo act, he wowed crowds in Las Vegas.

He also resumed acting in films. Martin's first solo film, *Ten Thousand Bedrooms* (1957), was a box-office failure. He was still popular as a singer, but with rock and roll beginning to come to the fore, the era of the pop crooner was waning. He wanted to become a dramatic actor, known for more than slapstick comedy films. Though offered a fraction of his former salary, he co-starred in a war drama, *The Young Lions* (1958), with Marlon Brando and Montgomery Clift. (Tony Randall already had the part, but talent agency MCA realized that with this film, Martin would become a triple threat: they could make money from his work in nightclubs, films, and records, so Martin was contracted to replace Randall. He received critical acclaim for his acting in the film, and it turned out to be the beginning of his movie career comeback).

As Martin's solo career grew, he and Frank Sinatra became friends. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Martin and Sinatra, along with friends Joey Bishop, Peter Lawford, and Sammy Davis, Jr. formed the Rat Pack, so-called after an earlier group of social friends, the Holmby Hills Rat Pack, of which Sinatra had been a member, and centered on Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. (The Martin-Sinatra-Davis-Lawford-Bishop group referred to themselves as "The Summit" or "The Clan," and never as "The Rat Pack," although this has remained the group's identity in popular imagination). The men made films together, formed part of the Hollywood social scene, and were politically influential (through Lawford's marriage to Patricia Kennedy, sister of President John F. Kennedy).



The Rat Pack was legendary for its Las Vegas Strip performances. For example, the marquee at the Sands Hotel might read DEAN MARTIN—MAYBE FRANK—MAYBE SAMMY. Their appearances were valuable because the city would flood with wealthy gamblers. Their act (always in tuxedo) consisted of each singing individual numbers, duets and trios, along with seemingly improvised slapstick and chatter. In the socially charged 1960s, their jokes revolved around adult themes, such as Sinatra's womanizing and Martin's drinking, as well as Davis' race and religion. Sinatra and Martin supported the civil rights movement and refused to perform in clubs that would not allow African-American or Jewish performers.

By the mid-1960s, Dean Martin had become a movie, recording, television, and nightclub megastar. He was critically acclaimed for his performance as "Dude" in *Rio Bravo* (1959), directed by Howard Hawks and also starring John Wayne and singer Ricky Nelson. He teamed again with Wayne in *The Sons of Katie Elder* (1965), cast as two brothers. In 1960, he was cast in the film version of the Judy Holliday stage musical comedy *Bells Are Ringing*. He won a Golden Globe nomination for his performance in the film comedy *Who Was That Lady?* (1960), but he still desired and sought dramatic roles, portraying a Southern politician in *Ada* (1961), and

starring in the screen adaptation of an intense stage drama, *Toys in the Attic* (1963), opposite Geraldine Page, as well as in the drama *Airport* (1970), a huge box-office success. All of these film performances were popular with critics and movie-goers.

Martin starred in movies alongside Sinatra for the first time in the Vincente Minnelli drama, *Some Came Running* (1958) with Shirley MacLaine. He teamed up again with Sinatra for several more movies: the crime caper *Ocean's 11* (1960), the musical *Robin and the 7 Hoods* (1964), and a Western comedy, *Sergeants 3* (1962), all with their Rat Pack pals. (*Sergeants 3* was the last film to feature all five members of the Rat Pack because of Sinatra's falling out with Lawford). The two also starred in *4 for Texas* (1963) with Charles Bronson, Anita Ekberg, and Ursula Andress. In addition, they starred with Deborah Kerr in a romantic comedy, *Marriage on the Rocks* (1965).

Martin also played a satiric variation of his own womanizing persona as Las Vegas singer "Dino" in Billy Wilder's comedy *Kiss Me, Stupid* (1964) with Kim Novak, and he poked fun at his image in films such as the four Matt Helm comedy spy spoofs of the 1960s, all of which he co-produced. (In the third Matt Helm film, *The Ambushers* (1967), Helm, about to be executed, receives a last cigarette and tells the provider, "I'll remember you from the great beyond," continuing sotto voce, "somewhere around Steubenville, I hope.") Over his lifespan, he appeared in 51 movies; his final starring role came in the 1974 film drama *Mr. Ricco*, in which he played a criminal defense lawyer.



As a singer, Martin copied the styles of Harry Mills (of the Mills Brothers), Bing Crosby, and Perry Como until he developed his own mode of singing, and he could hold his own in duets with Sinatra and Crosby. Like Sinatra, he could not read music, but he recorded more than 100 albums and 600 songs over his singing career. In 1962, Martin left Capitol Records and signed with Reprise Records, a label founded by Frank Sinatra in which Martin was an investor.

For nearly a decade, Martin recorded as many as four albums a year for Reprise. His signature tune, "Everybody Loves Somebody Sometime," which became the theme song for his TV variety show, knocked the Beatles' "A Hard Day's Night" off number one on the charts in the US in 1964. This was followed by "The Door is Still Open to My Heart," which reached number six that year. Elvis Presley was said to have been a fan of Martin, and patterned his performance of Love Me Tender after Martin's style. Both Martin and Elvis were influenced by country music. Examples of Martin's country/western songs are: "[Little Ole Wine Drinker, Me](#)," "[Houston](#)," and "[Detroit City](#)" These songs show the type of country/western sound he was presenting in his recordings, combining his superb phrasing with his

soft, relaxed, baritone crooning voice and the strong two-step beat. By 1965, some of Martin's albums, such as *Dean "Tex" Martin Rides Again* (1963), *Houston* (1965), *Welcome to My World* (1967), and *Gentle on My Mind* (1968), were composed of country and western songs by artists such as Johnny Cash, Merle Haggard, and Buck Owens, in addition to Martin himself. He often hosted country performers on his TV show and was named "Man of the Year" by the Country Music Association in 1966.

In 1965, Martin launched his weekly NBC comedy-variety series, *The Dean Martin Show*, which ran for 264 episodes until 1974. He won a Golden Globe Award for Best Actor–Television Series Musical or Comedy in 1966 and was nominated again the following three years. The show exploited his image as a carefree boozier. Martin capitalized on his laid-back persona of the half-drunk crooner, hitting on women with remarks that would get anyone else slapped. His TV show was a great success because it was built on a loose format that featured quick-witted improvisation from Martin and his weekly guests.



This prompted a battle between Martin and NBC censors, who insisted on more scrutiny of the content. He later had trouble with NBC for his off-the-cuff use of obscene Italian phrases, which brought complaints from viewers who spoke the language. Despite these problems (or perhaps because of them!), the show was often in the Top Ten.

One of the popular myths about him—that he was a heavy drinker who lived in a perpetual alcoholic haze—was an idea borrowed from Phil Harris and successfully promoted by Martin, whose supremely relaxed manner, ad-libbing, and slightly blurred diction in his crooning bolstered the image of a hard-drinking hedonist. However, his alcohol use was quite disciplined. He was often the first to call it a night, and when not on tour or on a film location, liked to go home to be with his wife and children. Visitors backstage and his fellow-entertainers knew that the glass he carried while performing on stage in his act was merely a prop filled with apple juice. He once commented during a TV biography of his life that NBC execs would not have risked the millions of dollars they invested in his variety shows if he were a drunkard who couldn't be trusted with producing a ratings-winning program that involved great comedic timing and singing ability.

By the early 1970s, *The Dean Martin Show* was still earning solid ratings, and although he was no longer a Top 40 hit-maker, his record albums continued to sell. Now comfortable financially, Martin began reducing his schedule. The final (1973–1974) season of *The Dean Martin Show* was renamed *The Dean Martin Comedy Hour*, and involved some celebrity-roast shows interspersed with his regular variety show. In the roasts, Martin and his panel of pals made fun of a variety of popular entertainment, athletic, and political figures. After the variety show was cancelled in 1974, NBC continued to air *The Dean Martin Celebrity Roast* as a series of TV specials shown sporadically through 1984.

The image of Martin as a Las Vegas entertainer in a tuxedo has been an enduring one. For three decades, he was among the most popular acts in Vegas, combining songs and comedy. (At the time, he was considered one of the smoothest comics in the business, benefiting from the decade of comedy he had developed while working with Lewis). Though often thought of as a ladies' man, he spent a great deal of time with his family; as his second wife, Jeanne, put it prior to the couple's divorce, "He was home every night for dinner."

He recorded his final Reprise album, *Once in a While* in 1974, which was not released until 1978. His later albums were recorded for Warner Brothers Records. His last recorded studio album *The Nashville Sessions* (1983), from which he had a hit, "[I Think That I Just Wrote My First Country Song](#)," was recorded with Conway Twitty and made a respectable showing on the country charts (Number 35).

In 1972, he filed for divorce (finalized in 1973) from his second wife, Dorothy Jean "Jeanne" Biegger, a former Orange Bowl queen from Coral Gables, Florida. They were married for 24 years (1949-1973) and had three children. A week after filing, his business partnership with the Riviera hotel in Las Vegas dissolved amid reports of the casino's refusal to agree to Martin's request to perform only once a night. He then moved to the MGM Grand Hotel and Casino, where he was the featured performer on the hotel's opening night of December 23, 1973. His contract required him to star in a film, *Mr. Ricco* (1974) for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studios, his final starring role in a movie. Less than a month after his second marriage had dissolved, (Martin was 55) he married 26-year-old Catherine Hawn, on April 25, 1973. Hawn had been the receptionist at the chic Gene Shacove hair salon in Beverly Hills. They divorced November 10, 1976. (They had no children together, although he adopted Hawn's daughter Sasha). He was also briefly engaged to Gail Renshaw, Miss World–U.S.A. in 1969. Eventually, Martin reconciled with Jeanne, though they never remarried.

He also made a public reconciliation with Lewis on the Jerry Lewis MDA Telethon in September, 1976. Frank Sinatra shocked Lewis by bringing Martin out on stage. As Martin and Lewis embraced, the audience gave the two a standing ovation and the phones lit up, resulting in one of the telethon's most profitable years up to that time. (Lewis later reported that this was one of the three most memorable events of his life). Lewis quipped, "So, you working?" Martin, playing drunk, replied that he was appearing "at the 'Meggum'" (meaning the MGM Grand Hotel). This, with the death of Martin's son Dean Paul Martin more than a decade later, helped bring the two men together. They maintained a quiet friendship, but only performed again once, in 1989, on Martin's 72nd birthday.



Martin returned to films briefly with appearances in the star-laden, critically panned but commercially successful *The Cannonball Run* and its sequel *Cannonball Run II*. He also had a minor hit single with “Since I Met You Baby” (1983) and made his first music video, which appeared on MTV. The video was created by Martin’s youngest son, Ricci. On March 21, 1987 Martin’s son, actor Dean Paul Martin (formerly Dino of the 1960s “teeny-bopper” rock group Dino, Desi & Billy), died when his F-4 Phantom II jet fighter crashed while flying with the California Air National Guard. Martin’s grief over his son’s death left him depressed and demoralized.

In 1988, he joined Sammy Davis, Jr. and Frank Sinatra on a nation-wide tour, undertaken in part to help him recover from his depression. The tour sputtered. Martin, who responded best to a club audience, felt lost in the huge stadiums where they were performing at Sinatra’s insistence, and he was not interested in drinking until dawn after each performance. He left the tour on March 24 and returned to his Beverly Hills home. (He was replaced on the tour by Liza Minelli in September). His final Vegas shows were at Bally’s Hotel in 1990. There he had his final reunion with Jerry Lewis on his 72nd birthday in 1989. Martin’s last two TV appearances involved tributes to several of his former Rat Pack members: On December 8, 1989, he joined stars in Sammy Davis, Jr.’s 60th anniversary celebration, which aired a few weeks before Davis died from throat cancer, and in December 1990, he congratulated Sinatra on his 75th birthday TV Special.



Martin was a heavy smoker, and was diagnosed with lung cancer at Cedars Sinai Medical Center in September, 1993. He was told that he would require surgery to prolong his life, but he rejected it. He retired from public life in early 1995.

Dean Martin died of acute respiratory failure resulting from emphysema at his Beverly Hills home on Christmas Day, 1995 at the age of 78. (His mother had died on Christmas Day, 29 years earlier in 1966). At the news of his death, Lewis was said to have been “completely shattered and grief-stricken.” The lights of the Las Vegas Strip were dimmed in his honor. His body was interred in a private ceremony at the Westwood Village Memorial Park Cemetery in Los Angeles, not far from the crypts of both of his parents. His crypt features the epitaph “Everybody Loves Somebody Sometime”, the title of his signature song.

Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from:

Biography.com website. “Dean Martin Biography”; Corwin, Miles and Ferrell, David. “Dean Martin Laid to Rest as Stars Avoid Media.” Los Angeles Times obituary. December 29, 1995; Deanmartin.com website; Encyclopedia Britannica website. “Dean Martin Biography”; Holden, Stephen; “Dean Martin, Pop Crooner And Comic Actor, Dies at 78,” New York Times obituary, December 26, 1995, Section D, page 8; Italy Heritage website, “Dean Martin”; Lewis, Jerry and Kaplan, James. Dean & Me (A Love Story). New York: Doubleday, 2005; Wikipedia website, “Dean Martin.”