

# ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



## LOUIS PRIMA

[This is the sixth article about legendary figures in the Jazz world, presenting little-known facts about those artists, about whom we thought we knew everything, or as time went on, had forgotten.]

Long before Steve Martin became that “wild and crazy guy,” and long before the hyperactive Sonny and the deadpan Cher, there was Louis Prima (and his wife, Keely Smith). His sound was unmistakable, infectious and irresistible. Jazz fans loved him because he was so wild, intense, over-the-top, colorful, and just plain fun to watch and hear.

Born December 7, 1911 in New Orleans, he first planned to play concert violin as a career – until he found his brother’s trumpet! Good choice. Being a rather burly chap, he had difficulty feeling the various sensitivities of his violin. Guy Lombardo, of all people, heard Prima’s trumpet playing and gave him his first big break, bringing him to New York, where he led several bands. In 1937, he penned a song called “Sing, Sing, Sing,” and Benny Goodman recorded an instrumental version which became a smash hit after Goodman showcased it in his legendary Carnegie Hall appearance.

Prima never took his music seriously, prompting critics to ignore his talents as a superb jazzman and composer.



But time passed and Louis struck gold again, this time with his twenty-two piece orchestra, on a huge hit entitled, “Angelina.” Now pizza, veal parmegiana, pasta fagirole, and antipasto became everyday words, outside of the Italian community. Then, riding the momentum, he had one smash after another; “Josephina,” “Please No Squeeza Da Banana,” “Bacciagaloop, Makes Love on the Stoop,” and “Felicia No Capicia,”

To counteract the ever-increasing threat of Rock ‘n Roll from Elvis and others, Louis reinvented himself by developing a combination of a shuffle beat, New Orleans rock and a howling sax (just think about his “Just A Gigolo – I Ain’t Got Nobody”), and you’ll get the idea. He wasn’t solely responsible for this sound. He had brought New Orleans tenor saxman Sam

Butera to join him in 1954, hoping to win over the younger set with Sam's jump blues style. Instead, it made him an instant hit as the most powerful adult contemporary performer of the era.

Sam Butera and The Witnesses were a tremendous asset to Prima, but his popularity surged again when he brought his female vocalist to the new mix. She was a 16 year old Norfolk, VA native named Dorothy Keely when he first hired her in 1948. In the summer of '53, a renamed Keely Smith became Prima's fourth wife. Her pokerfaced expression wasn't all an act; she was extremely shy. And that's what made the duo such a hit. Here's Louis: boisterous, mugging, clowning, tearing around the stage like a hyperactive kid, trying to crack Keely's icily reserved facade. Now it was the Louis, Keely and Sam show, becoming a huge hit in the casinos and hotels in Las Vegas. Billed as "The Wildest Show In Vegas," it ran up to five times a night at The Sahara.

The couple won The Grammys' Award for Best Song in 1959 for their duet "That Old Black Magic." But their magic together personally and professionally was waning, resulting in a divorce in 1961. Not to be denied, Louis hired a new female vocalist named Gia Maione (say "my own"). Whereas Keely was aloof and unsmiling, Gia was bouncy enough to give Louis a run for his money. She married Prima in 1963, at a time when one reporter commented that, if Keely was young enough to be his daughter, then Gia was young enough to be his grandchild. Age, however, didn't seem to matter. Louis had met his match, and apparently reformed his philandering ways and remained faithful to Gia for the rest of his life.

His most famous gig occurred in 1967 when Disney tapped him to be the voice of King Louie, ruler of the orangutans, in its animated "Jungle Book." His character in the film was totally vintage Louis. He sang "I Wanna Be Like You," considered to be the best part of the flick.

Doctors discovered and removed a brain tumor in 1975, but Louis lapsed into a coma, survived almost three years, never regained consciousness, and died August 24, 1978. But his legacy survived to this day.

Some of the films and shows featuring his music are: "The Sopranos" (1 episode, 2007), Mission: Impossible III (2006), Elf (2003), The Majestic (2001), Analyze This (1999), Casino (1995), Raging Bull (1980), The Benny Goodman Story (1955). His classic recording of Buona Sera was featured during the closing ceremony of the 2006 Winter Olympics. The reader may

want to listen to his album "The Wildest Comes Home!" (Capitol Records T-755.) Sinatra may have done it "My Way," but Louis Prima was truly one-of-a-kind, and did it HIS way.

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