

# Mel Torme, an appreciation

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The last few years have not been good ones for the giants of American song. First we lost the incomparable Ella Fitzgerald, then Frank Sinatra and Joe Williams. Now Mel Torme, who died Saturday from the lingering effects of the debilitating stroke which abruptly ended his 65-year singing career in August 1996.

Of the same immigrant Russian-Jewish stock which contributed so many exemplary figures to twentieth century American music (George and Ira Gershwin, Irving Berlin, Benny Goodman, Stan Getz, etc.), Torme was born in Chicago on September 13, 1925. A child prodigy, he began singing publicly at the age of four, acting by age nine, and playing drums by time he was a teenager. His first published song, "Lament to Love," was recorded by Harry James when Torme was only 15. He would go on to publish another 250 songs, mostly in collaboration with Bob Wells. Their best known effort is, of course, "The Christmas Song," recorded by Nat King Cole in 1945, and a holiday classic ever since. Torme frequently commented that the song took less than an hour to write and was not one of his personal favorites.

Torme became quite well known during the World War II years as the driving force behind the Mel-Tones, a vocal group specializing in jazzy arrangements, usually backed by the swing band of Artie Shaw. He went solo in 1947, recording a number of romantic hits, including the number one "Careless Love." His high pitched, silky-smooth vocal style earned him the sobriquet "Velvet Fog," which he loathed.

During the 1950s, as the elegant musical traditions he represented were displaced by rock and roll and his popularity with youth waned, Torme gradually abandoned the commercial path and turned more and more to jazz. His art reached its first creative peak on a series of albums arranged by the excellent Marty Paich, one of the leading figures in West Coast jazz of that period. By the end of the decade he had become,

perhaps, the greatest male singer in the history of jazz.

Torme's style shared much with that of his idol, Ella Fitzgerald. Both were firmly rooted in the foundation of the swing era, but both seemed able to incorporate bebop innovations to keep their performances sounding fresh and contemporary. Like Sinatra, they sang with perfect diction and brought out the emotional content of the lyrics through subtle alterations of phrasing and harmony. Ballads were characterized by paraphrasing of the original melody which always seemed tasteful, appropriate and respectful to the vision of the songwriter. Unlike Sinatra, both Fitzgerald and Torme were likely to cut loose during a swinging up-tempo number with several "scat" choruses, using their voices without words to improvise a solo like a brass or reed instrument.

The 1960s became increasingly unpleasant for straight-ahead jazz performers. Their audiences dwindled while the audience for much simpler rock music grew to staggering proportions. As a result, Torme made some half-hearted attempts at commercial recordings (with generally embarrassing results) and pursued other interests, including acting and writing. He published *The Other Side of the Rainbow* about his experience as a writer for the Judy Garland Show during 1963-64, a novel *Wynner*, and later an autobiography and a not entirely flattering biography of jazz drummer and bandleader Buddy Rich.

The resurgence of interest in jazz which began in the 1970s was of particular benefit to Torme. During the last 20 years of his career he recorded frequently in a variety of tasteful settings, including a very special series of dates with pianist George Shearing. In addition to producing a steady stream of LPs and CDs, he performed live up to 200 live dates annually, and appeared regularly on television.

I was fortunate to have attended a Torme concert not particularly long ago. Bing Crosby once said that he

was “the most fantastic musical performer I think we've ever had,” and I can certainly understand where this opinion comes from. Age seemed not to have diminished Torme's skills in the slightest, while time clearly allowed them to grow and deepen. Torme spoke to the audience with grace, humor and charm—something Sinatra could never do—and moved through a fascinating variety of musical numbers, including a quick stint on the drums, flawlessly. My companion and I left both satisfied and anxious for more.

Our experience was typical. According to his longtime bass player John Leitham, Torme's consistent level of performance was astounding. “There will be no tapes or videos portraying him as a singer past his prime. He never sounded better than he did at the last performance.”

The passing of a talent like Mel Torme unavoidably causes one to wonder whether any others of his immense talents are coming of age today. Examining the popular music landscape suggest that this might not be the case. The reason, I think, is that a society which hails movies like *Titanic* and *The Phantom Menace*, and equally mindless counterparts in popular music, as serious works is not going to nurture or promote the aesthetic ideals necessary to produce a Mel Torme.



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