

# Doris Day, prominent postwar American actress and singer, dies at 97

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Doris Day, the film actress and singer, died Monday at 97 from pneumonia in Carmel Valley, California. Day was one of the most prominent American performers in film and music of the 1950s and '60s. She largely retired more than four decades ago.

She became immensely popular (by certain calculations, the *most* popular female film star of all time) in a series of romantic comedies, including *Pillow Talk* (1960), *Lover Come Back* (1961), *That Touch of Mink* (1962), *The Thrill of It All* (1963) and *Move Over, Darling* (1963), opposite Rock Hudson, Cary Grant and James Garner. However, her most compelling performances came before that in films such as *Young Man with a Horn* (1950), *Love Me or Leave Me* (1955) and, above all, Alfred Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956).

For decades, Day has been a culturally polarizing figure. The mere mention of her name causes some to sneer, whereas, in part a response to that type of snobbery, another category of commentators offers nearly uncritical adulation. A more objective, historical approach is needed.

Day's life and career reflect the contradictory character and development of postwar popular culture and American life more generally. On the one hand, she expressed in her early and middle period the energy and optimism of a generation deeply relieved that the Depression and World War were over and looking forward to the future. The period permitted or even encouraged what James Cagney, with whom Day starred in *Love Me or Leave Me* (1955), approvingly termed the actress' "ability to project the simple, direct statement of a simple, direct idea without cluttering it."

On the other hand, the unraveling of the economic boom and the political conditions that accompanied it, marked by the civil rights movement and the inner-city riots, the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the widening and disastrous intervention in Vietnam, led to a situation where by the late 1960s the continuing, unrealistic cheerfulness and embalmed morality of her films seemed inappropriate and uninteresting to new generations.

By 1968, Day was starring in such bland, oblivious fare as *Where Were You When the Lights Went Out?* and *With Six You Get Eggroll*. Those were her last two feature films.

In a country where film and music remain in the hands of a money-making apparatus that operates on the basis of the crudest pragmatic calculations, such abrupt (and sometimes cruel) shifts are almost inevitable. Doris Day became the victim of a particularly sharp change, in both popular mood and entertainment industry requirements, which led to her self-exile.

Day was born Doris Mary Ann Kappelhoff in Cincinnati, Ohio. Her father was a music teacher and her mother also had an interest in music. While recuperating, at 15, from a leg injury that put an end to her hopes of becoming a dancer, Day began to sing along to the radio, she explained later, and to American jazz singer Ella Fitzgerald in particular. She told A. E. Hotchner, with whom she wrote a memoir, that there was a quality to Fitzgerald's voice "that fascinated me, and I'd sing along with her, trying to catch the subtle ways she shaded her voice, the casual yet clean way she sang the words."

By 17, Doris Day was singing with one of the most popular bands in the US, led by Les Brown. At 18, she was divorced from a violently abusive husband and had a son. As various commentators have noted, she came of age during the Depression and, above all, valued working as hard as possible, earning money of her own and somehow keeping afloat.

In 1945, she came to prominence as a vocalist when her version of *Sentimental Journey* struck a chord with a population weary of war and yearning to get on with life. It describes a long-awaited, long-delayed journey home by train. "Got my bag, got my reservation / Spent each dime I could afford / Like a child in wild anticipation / Long to hear that 'All aboard.'" It was an enormous hit.

Another biographer, Tom Santopietro, suggests Day was "the perfect embodiment of post-World War II America, when problems were deemed solvable with a little determination and a lot of straightforward thinking."

In 1947, Day auditioned for the remarkable Hungarian-American director Michael Curtiz (*Casablanca*, *Mildred Pierce*). Although—or because—she confessed to him she had absolutely no acting experience, Curtiz was charmed by her and urged her not to take acting lessons. Somehow, in the midst of all the other films he was making, including major works (*Flamingo Road*, *The Breaking Point*), Curtiz managed to direct Day four times.

The most substantial of those is *Young Man with a Horn*, loosely inspired by the short and tragic life of jazz musician Bix Beiderbecke (1903–1931). Kirk Douglas plays the lead character Rick Martin and Day is singer Jo Jordan, but Juano Hernandez as Art Hazzard, the black trumpeter who tutors and advises Martin and whom the latter reveres, has the greatest impact in the film by far. The work is unusual for its integration of black and white characters.

Day is lively in *Calamity Jane* (1953), a silly musical set in the

Old West and directed by David Butler, also with Howard Keel. With her physical comedy and unpretentiousness, she endears herself to the audience. Also in her “tomboyish” phase, she climbs under an automobile and repairs it, to the discomfort of boy friend Gordon MacRae, in *By the Light of the Silvery Moon* (1953, also David Butler), a musical inspired by Booth Tarkington stories.

*Young at Heart* (Gordon Douglas, 1955), a remake of *Four Daughters* (1938) with John Garfield and Claude Rains, is a relatively somber work. Frank Sinatra plays the cynical, world-weary Barney Sloane, who enters the life of the musical Tuttle family (this time with three daughters) and falls for Day, who is engaged to his friend. Notably, Sinatra performs a memorable version of the Gershwin tune, “Someone to Watch Over Me,” while Day’s character gazes at him with ferocious concentration.

In *Love Me or Leave Me*, a biographical musical set in Chicago in the 1920s, James Cagney is gangster Martin Snyder and Day, singer Ruth Etting. Etting works as a “dime-a-dance” girl (the real Etting began in a brothel) who comes to the attention of Snyder. He decides to further her career, but expects sexual favors in return. She refuses, but Snyder continues to be interested in her and her career. Etting is in love with her accompanist, piano player Johnny Alderman (Cameron Mitchell), which eventually spurs Snyder to violence. Day’s rendition of “Ten Cents a Dance” is remarkable for its anger and sensuality. Anyone convinced of Day’s “sexless” and “virginal” personality is likely to be disabused.

In Hitchcock’s *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, the finest film in which Day appeared, she and James Stewart are a “typical” middle class American couple vacationing in Morocco. Inadvertently, they become aware of an assassination set to take place in London. Their child is kidnapped to keep them silent.

Stephen Whitty (*The Alfred Hitchcock Encyclopedia*) observes that Day conveys “a real feeling of anguish and loss as the parent of a kidnapped child; a true feeling of betrayal, too, at an emotionally distant husband who has stopped her [singing] career and at one point even doses her with sedatives without her knowledge.”

Beyond that, at the film’s crucial moment, Day’s character has to choose between protecting her son and preventing a political tragedy with presumably large-scale implications, including potentially the deaths of a great many people. Critic Robin Wood noted the characteristically “Hitchcockian moral quality” of the suspense, which is “the outward projection of the agonising conflict within the heroine’s mind.” That sort of dilemma clearly emerged from the situations great numbers of people had faced under fascist and totalitarian regimes in the 1930s and 1940s. It is a scene of tremendous tension and Day carries it off beautifully.

The romantic comedies of the late 1950s and ’60s are gradually less interesting and appealing. There are amusing bits in them, with Hudson, Garner and Tony Randall in particular. Of course, the notion that Day was responsible for her name becoming a “byword for coy, pre-Pill prudery and out-of-touch morality,” in Tamar Jeffers McDonald’s phrase, is unfair. Day had little say in what relentlessly conformist themes Hollywood was promoting, even as the ground underneath the film industry’s feet—and the general condition in the US—was become less and less stable.

*Bright Lights* Film Journal points out that

detested her virginal image. She knew that ‘a ‘Doris Day movie’ had come to mean a very specific kind of sunny, nostalgic, sexless, wholesome film.’... In her book [with Hotchner] she says, ‘I have the unfortunate reputation of being Miss Goody Two-Shoes, America’s Virgin, and all that, so I’m afraid it’s going to shock some people for me to say this, but I staunchly believe no two people should get married until they have lived together.’ She loathed the pristine image in part because it was a lie—she was against artifice ... and in part because the image was impossible for someone with her biography to live up to.” That “biography” included several unhappy marriages and a bankruptcy that resulted from her and her husband being swindled out of their money.

Film critic Molly Haskell wrote intriguingly about and interviewed Day in the mid-1970s. She came to Day’s defense when the former movie star was not in favor with what Haskell termed the “cultural arbiters.” Those detractors were responding, the critic wrote, to the image of “the superannuated virgin of the sexless sex comedies, protected by cameras coated with seven veils of Vaseline from growing old before our eyes. With the aid of the rejuvenating techniques at the disposal of the film industry and her sunny inviolability, Doris Day would seem to remain forever a girl on the brink of experience.”

Haskell argued, however, that “the image of the eternal virgin is one-sided. At the same time, Day was challenging, in her workingwoman roles, the limited destiny of women to marry, live happily ever after, and never be heard from again. The fate of women to contract spiritually and finally to disappear into the miasma of male fantasies, as they did on the screen in the sixties, was one to which she would not resign herself.”

There is some truth to these points, and the fashionable, hedonistic taste-makers of the 1960s and beyond, for whom thoughtless violence and sexuality became a cheap, marketable reflex, proved to be no more on a valid or substantial path than Day with her “wholesomeness.” Nonetheless, there is something undeniably exhausted and stale about *Send Me No Flowers* (1964, Norman Jewison), *The Glass Bottom Boat* (1966, Frank Tashlin) and Day’s other late films.

One suspects the actress will be remembered, above all, for the energy, independence, unselfishness and humor she displayed in her film work in the early and mid-1950s.



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