

ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



MEL TORMÉ

[This is the thirty-second 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.]

Known as “The Velvet Fog,” (Oh, Lord, how he hated that nickname), he often commented that he was actually “The Velvet Frog!” Melvin Howard Tormé, aka “The Kid With the Gauze In His Jaws” or “Mr. Butterscotch,” however you classify his “sound,” was truly unique.

Born in Chicago on September 13, 1925, Mel began to sing professionally at age 4, debuting at Otto Roth’s place -- hey, you Chicagoans: remember Don Roth’s Blackhawk Restaurant? Otto was his Dad -- singing *You’re Driving Me Crazy*” By the time he was 16, he acted in the network radio serials *The Romance of Helen Trent* and *Jack Armstrong, the All-American Boy*. At 13 he began writing songs. At 16, he scored his first published song, *Lament to Love*, becoming a hit for Harry James. Should we perhaps ordain him a child prodigy? I mean, this kid was really hot!

Mel was probably one of the original teen idols, appearing in Sinatra’s first film, the musical *Higher and Higher*. Tormé continued to sing and act in many films and television episodes throughout his career, even hosting his own television show in 1951–52. Paying homage to Frank and his Pied Pipers, Mel formed the quintet, The Mel-Tones, in 1944, which was later acknowledged by The Hi-Lo's, The Four Freshmen, and The Manhattan Transfer as being their guiding star.

Tormé went solo in 1947, recording for Decca and Capitol, his versions of *Again* and *Blue Moon* became signature tunes. It was at this point in his career that a local New York City DJ, Fred Robbins, gave Mel the “Velvet Fog” moniker. After a string of hit ballads, Tormé began leaning toward the new “cool jazz” movement. During the mid-50s, he recorded an astounding seven jazz albums, during the time when Rock ‘n Roll came into vogue. Never lost for words, Mel called this new music “three chord manure.” But, alas, his brand of music began to elude commercial success.

During the following years, Mel recorded often, but never sticking with one label for long, made his living singing in many obscure clubs, appeared in several TV shows and movies, including the film *Walk Like A Dragon*. In this western, he played “The Deacon,” a preacher/gunfighter employed as a saloon enforcer. In a memorable scene, he taught a young Chinese student the “fast draw.” In real life, he was acknowledged to be a fast-draw expert.

Tormé composed songs and arrangements for *The Judy Garland Show* in 1963–64, but he and Garland were constantly arguing, resulting in Judy firing him. The series was

canceled by CBS shortly afterwards. In 1970, after Garland's death, his experiences with Garland and her show became the subject of his first book, *The Other Side of the Rainbow with Judy Garland on the Dawn Patrol*. The book was well-received, but painted Judy as hopelessly drug-addicted, unprofessional and nearly impossible to work with.

During his later years, he played many Las Vegas dates, and earned yet another nickname, the “Blue Fox,” so named by his “mature” female audiences at the Sands while he performed under the famous blue stage lighting. In 1981, he was awarded a Star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame for Recording at 1541 Vine Street in Hollywood. He continued to entertain his fans until the mid-90s, when a stroke ended an illustrious 65-year career. A second stroke in 1999 ended his life, but his influence on music lives on.



Two notable events in Tormé’s life stand out in my mind. First, during a brutally hot summer day, Mel spotted a notepad on collaborator Bob Wells’ piano. Bob had penned four lines of notes: ‘Chestnuts roasting..., Jack Frost nipping..., Yuletide carols..., Folks dressed up like Eskimos.’ According to Mel, Bob was just trying to “stay cool by thinking cool,” and not writing lyrics to a song, which forty minutes later, Mel had completed the melody and the rest of the lyrics to *The Christmas Song*!

The second event, although not earth-shaking, simply shows how respected Tormé actually was. In a 1988 Warner Brothers cartoon, *Night of the Living Duck*, Daffy Duck is made to sing, but just doesn’t have the voice. However, he inhales a substance labeled “Eau de Tormé” which does the trick (Mel provided the voiceover, of course).

His best music, to my mind, can be found in his album CD, *It’s A Blue World*, available from CDUniverse.com, stock number 1472044, on the Fusion label. Give it a listen and you’ll discover just what made this recording artist so exceptional.

Tom and his wife Cheryl perform locally as “Just Me 2”, a live music duo specializing in songs from the Great American Songbook. They can be reached at (772) 532-5054 or at www.JustMeLiveMusic.com. See them on Facebook at www.facebook.com/JustMeLiveMusic