

HED: DEAN MARTIN

BYLINE: Eugene Robinson

The drill is one that's familiar to habitués of the halls of musology at this point. The knee bone is connected to the ankle bone and the ankle bone is connected to the foot bone and voila you have the beginning of the magical monster parts that make the artist that you like just a cross-hatched reference on either side of the lame calculus "sounds like a cross between the 'making the same record again Sonic Youth' and 'making the same bad record again Beck'."

And then there'll be a stumble and a rush onto the next music morsel and so we catalog and catalog everything that was joyful into dust.

So yeah, the whole enterprise is a rotten one.

Translation: EPIPHANIES, my ass.

Because the sounds that have formed the basis for OXBOW (www.theoxbow.com) and the music that WE make are the sounds that thrum along in the throb of bloodstream and are most noticed in moments say when the hand is becoming a fist and it all slips into that double time theater where everything rushes comic quick and it's not over until someone is crying. Yes, the sounds of violence, because violence does have an animal sound that's all its own, as well as a taste and a timbre, and it's this that has captivated us for so very long of a time.

So then strange for me to have discovered this skulking in the recesses of my voluminous vanity and quiet rages and attached, inescapably, to the avatar of dead-eyed, late-stage debauchery: DEAN MARTIN.

I'll wait while you laugh. Go ahead, laugh, laugh if you want, but the irony here is not post-modern because the irony here is that there's no irony here at all. My love for Dean Martin is pure and clean.

Let's slide back a bit. In time. To a time when vocalists roamed the Earth. Not just singers but vocalists, that is, artists who sing. From a place that's as inaccessible as the place that gives rise to life's big FUCK YOU items: loss, love, longing, lust. JOHNNY HARTMAN. JOHNNY MATHIS. JOHNNIE RAY. FRANK SINATRA. JOE WILLIAMS. SAMMY DAVIS JR. and a passel of others whose stars dimmed or died. All eventually done in first by musicians who had lost sight of the fact that in full Greek chorus fashion the vocalist was the demiurge without which they were just, oh I don't know, free jazz players doing the sound, doing the fury, and signifying if not nothing than surely the fact that some exercises in ego are more fun to play than to listen to. Later, the terrible troika of bad singing (read: Britney), no singing (read: Mogwai) or non-singing

(read: D.J's), would make singing if not unnecessary, then horribly misunderstood, as was the vocalists that were responsible for it.

Which is where we are now. With no referents. No coordinates. Up shit creek, drifting through a crap causeway because everybody's gone all egalitarian and thinks that singing is as easy as opening your fucking mouth.

Well it's not.

And in the gloam of my imaginings I can see them all now, these purveyors of the violence of cool: Bing Crosby. Dean Martin. And Elvis. All of a type with Crosby the Father, Elvis the son, and Dean the Holy Fucking Ghost of the Killing Disconnect. You see after reading everything there is to read about Dean Martin I know this much about a man that I've lionized straight-facedly as a Saint (to which a waggish detractor decried, "he's just a sleazy boozehound."): in life as in his art he sat outside of it all, a curiously detached dues to the worlds he was creating.

Detached but not without his passions. Detached passions all oxymoronicly as perfect as perfect could be, this former boxer (boxed as Kid Crochet. Not after the knitting but his real last name Crocetti) insinuated his way into my life for the first time when I was five years old. The song was "STANDING ON THE CORNER" and while I don't remember that I knew it then it seems to me at this remove that the song's signature line for me—"Brother you can't go to jail for what you're thinking, or for the woo look in your eye"—was blasting out of every Italian house in New Rochelle, New York, when Italians still lived in New Rochelle, New York, as gardeners and chauffeurs for the rich ensconced in nearby Westchester.

"For what you're thinking." Indeed. Because as leastways as anyone could figure out they could never figure out what Dean was thinking. When he knocked the Beatles off the charts in 1964. When he moved over to good films, The Young Lions, and bad TV in those endless, drunken variety shows. When his son died.

Like his former partner Jerry Lewis (a genius in France) used to say: NOTHING.

Or to quote author and son of the famous Groucho, Arthur Marx in his hard-to-find Martin bio "**Everybody Loves Somebody Sometime... (Especially Himself)**," the mystery to Dean was no mystery at all because "Looking backward, the secret of Dean Martin's extraordinary success has always seemed to be 'complete indifference' when opportunity comes knocking."

And rather than understanding this as the end result of that horrible product of the stupid and beautiful—cool—I understood it totally differently. As incredible hostility. Sure, sure, sure we KNOW that they say that every biography and certainly every hagiography, is really a writer's attempt to write about themselves and hearing OXBOW music you might be tempted to say "sure he sees hostility there...he probably sees hostility EVERYwhere." But it's there I tell you.

In VOLARE. In ON AN EVENING IN ROMA. In MEMORIES ARE MADE OF THIS.

Trojan horsing its way into the collective subconscious of an entire generation who would later see this music pawned with the pejorative EASY LISTENING, or mocked by the jive ass lounge revival, Dean Martin's vocals say one thing to my ears: FUCK YOU.

Or as he most honestly sang in his long suppressed nightclub sides where everybody, regardless of relation, was a "Pally," "Blow me...a kiss before you go."

Out. On the arches. Away from him. His disdain was elementally existential.

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