

Thanks for the Memories

Van Heusen guided Sinatra to desert

Songwriter's piano lounge at Desert Inn drew Rat Pack

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By 1958 in Palm Springs, when the Desert Circus parade and Mayor Frank Bogert decided to honor Texas, the state of all things true cowboy, the Rat Pack and the mid-century's architecture had already moved into town.

The ability for both sensibilities to exist in tandem was beautifully illustrated by Jimmy Van Heusen's swinging tune, "1200 Miles from Palm Springs to Texas."

Written specifically for the parade, the tune epitomized Van Heusen's versatility and whimsy. He came to the task with a world of experience. Born in New York as Chester Babcock, he renamed himself Van Heusen, as he thought it sounded classy, like the fancy shirts made by the company of that name. By his late teens he was a veteran of Tin Pan Alley and the Cotton Club revue, he wrote more than 60 songs in 1940 alone, and his 1939 tune, the incomparable, "Darn that Dream," hit No. 1 as recorded by Benny Goodman's orchestra with Mildred Bailey singing in 1940. He teamed up that same year with Johnny Burke and the two moved to Hollywood to try their hands at writing for the movies.

In 1944, having been in Hollywood only a few years, the duo won the Academy Award for Best Original Song for "Swinging on a Star" sung by Bing Crosby in the movie "Going My Way." They wrote for many different musicals and movies throughout the 1940s and '50s, including many of Bing's movies. Van Heusen's and Crosby's paths both led to the desert, as Bing was a regular feature



Songwriter Jimmy Van Heusen poses with his Oscars — and an Emmy.

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around the links and had a home in Thunderbird Heights.

Van Heusen then teamed with lyricist Sammy Cahn and would write songs that another desert-dweller, Frank Sinatra would be known for ever after: "All the Way," "Come Fly with Me," "Polka Dots and Moonbeams," "Love and Marriage," and "High Hopes" the later of which would be adopted by Jack Kennedy's campaign for president. (The apocryphal story goes that when Kennedy was to visit the desert, he was go-

ing to stay with Sinatra. Bobby Kennedy was worried about Frank's womanizing and possible mob connections and nixed the idea, having the president stay at Bing's house instead. Ironically, that weekend is purported to be the only time that Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe actually slept together. The Secret Service stayed next door at Van Heusen's house.)

Van Heusen and Frank Sinatra met around 1935 in New York, when they were both unknowns. Over the next

nearly half a century, they were the best of friends, working and womanizing together. (Van Heusen was quoted as saying, "I took song writing seriously when I discovered girls.") It was Van Heusen who took Sinatra to the hospital after his failed suicide attempt while despondent over the loss of Ava Gardner. Frank recorded more songs by Van Heusen than any other songwriter, more than 60 tunes in all. Sinatra followed Van Heusen to the desert, bringing the Rat Pack with them.

Van Heusen had a piano lounge in the Desert Inn after Nellie Coffman's heirs sold the Inn to Marion Davies, the long-time companion of William Randolph Hearst. Celebrities and musicians, the Rat Pack itself, would convene there, in the decidedly early Californian, Spanish-style buildings, in the center of town. But the music was straight from the pages of the American songbook and it was in stark contrast to the simple, cowboy melodies of the earlier movie era.

Dean Martin would record a Van Heusen song that would become iconic for him, "Ain't that a Kick in the Head" shortly after he did the honors for "1200 Miles from Palm Springs to Texas" in 1958 as a favor for Van Heusen, Ray Ryan and the whole town. The tune swings. It is a fun jaunt, a square dance in an earlier era, and its lyrics extol the virtues of the cowboy life and real western atmosphere in exuberant, mid-century style.

That a songwriter and composer of Van Heusen's ability would find himself in the Coachella Valley surrounded by the most famous movie stars of the time is remarkable enough. That he was among other statures composers of the era, like Johnny Mercer and Hoagy Carmichael, who were also living in the valley, speaks to the allure of the desert.

Van Heusen was inducted in to the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1971.

He is appropriately buried down the way from Frank Sinatra himself at Desert Memorial Park in Cathedral City.