

Desert jazz cat Phil Harris was cool by every definition

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While it's somewhat ironic to say "it's cool" in the desert due to generally prevailing temperatures, the notion that the most-admired, desirable people and things — those that are deemed "cool" — are part of the desert scene has been true for decades; and the common refrain, "That's cool!" originates, as do many everyday phrases in the language of jazz.

Layering new meaning onto words that were only understood by the most important and attractive people, the cool crowd, was invented by jazz musicians in the early part of the 20th century. And the definition of "cool" was a musician who could swing.

According to writer Ben Zimmer, "Cool is an old word, of course, and leading up to the 20th century it had developed an array of meanings from 'calm and dispassionate' to 'audaciously impudent.' But it took the jazzmen of the 1940s to transform it into the universal sign of approval."

In jazz circles, cool was first associated with sax player Lester Young in the early 1940s. Mainstream publications like *The New Yorker* magazine reported in 1948, "The bebop people have a language of their own... their expressions of approval include 'cool!'" That same year, music critics picked up on the use of cool to describe a new, more relaxed style of jazz. "Hot jazz is dead. Long live cool jazz!" announced the *Bridgeport Telegram*, while *Life* magazine profiled Dizzy Gillespie as a "trumpeter who is hot, cool and gone."

By the 1960s, so many jazz idioms had been thoroughly adopted by the mainstream that the teenagers who were using the slang had no idea from whence it came.

Desert culture included the super cool Rat Pack singers like Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin and Sammy Davis, Jr. Bandleaders and musicians traveled back and forth between the California



Bossa Nova party at Thunderbird Country Club with performers Phil Harris and Alice Faye. PALM SPRINGS LIFE ARCHIVES/PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

and Nevada deserts.

In Las Vegas, Louis Prima was redefining cool with his unique jump sound. "I'm the king of the swingers, the jungle V.I.P." boasted Prima's orangutan king in Walt Disney's 1967 movie "The Jungle Book," borrowing a term from jazz and making a fun pun.

Desert denizen Phil Harris voiced Baloo the Bear in the flick and "ooh bi doo be doo'ed" along with Prima. In the other swinging tune in the movie, Harris touted his relaxed mantra, the "bear necessities of life will come to you!"

Cool or hot, "swinging" was an apt description of Harris in every way. Born Wonga Philip Harris, he got his chops and carefree aplomb from being a jazz musician and leader of a 25-piece band.

He grew up with the rhythm that defined the era.

A chance meeting got him a gig with Jack Benny on the radio where they pioneered situation comedy. Known for his rapid one-liners and amusing delivery and choice of words, he lived up to his Cherokee name of Wonga, or "fast messenger."

Harris married his second wife, movie star Alice Faye in 1941, and teamed with her for their own hilarious radio skits broadcast every Sunday nationwide. They defined glamour in the 1950s and 60s.

The couple moved to the desert, following his close pal, crooner Bing Crosby, and because of Harris' penchant for golf, bought a house at Thunderbird

Country Club so he could indulge that passion.

Harris and Faye quickly became omnipresent at every evening charity function, cocktail and dinner party. Harris was the host or entertainment for almost all. Newspapers are littered with accounts of his antics and fun. During the day, he was a fixture at charity golf tournaments as swinging a golf club was his major occupation.

In the late 1960s, Walt Disney's company, convinced Harris to voice the part of Baloo the Bear for *The Jungle Book* movie. They already had Louis Prima for the distinctive voice of his foil. And Harris' deep, sonorous tone made him the logical best friend for the movie's wayward man-cub and made it easy for the audience to relax into his jazzy life philosophy.

The iconic Duke Ellington tune sums it up: "It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing." Reserved as a description for only the coolest of cats who understood how to swing the music, a difficult feat where the weak beat is emphasized and the solos are laid back behind the beat, requiring virtuoso technical skill, and more importantly, a feel for the music that is uncommon, swing is the definition of cool. (And certainly not understood by "squares" who read music from the page.)

Phil Harris was the epitome of every definition of cool. His Associated Press obituary noted, "With a toothy grin and a Southern accent gained during a childhood in Nashville, Harris created a caricature of himself as a lovable, over-drinking swinger. His trademark was a finger-snapping rendition of "That's What I Like About the South," and he greeted Benny show audience with a snappy 'Hiya, Jackson!'"

Clearly, Harris snapped on two and four! Were he alive today, he most certainly would be the emcee of the newly minted Palm Springs International Jazz Festival, enjoying the show. Cool musicians and swinging bands in the desert are necessities of life for sure. Tickets are available at palmspringsjazz.org