

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Sinatra pal Keely Smith defined desert cool

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The concept of “cool,” invented by jazz musicians, was incarnated in the late 1950s in Las Vegas by Louis Prima and Keely Smith. Smith is widely credited with being the only female member of the legendary Rat Pack, who, along with her then-husband Prima, created the canon of the Las Vegas lounge act. By 1975 both Smith and Sinatra, the leader of the Rat Pack, were living in Palm Springs. They’d known each other for a long time and were very good friends.

Will Friedwald, foremost expert on all things jazz in the midcentury who “studied elocution with Prof. Henry Higgins and musicology with Prof. Harold Hill,” once said the nightclub act of Louis Prima and Keely Smith “was a brilliant juxtaposition of maximalism and minimalism.” Prima was outrageous, jumping around the stage, frenetically interacting with his bandmates and teasing the audience. Smith was a perfect counterpoint: poised, sardonic, almost bored. Friedwald noted: “The less she did, the funnier it was ...”

Prima and Smith began on the road with his big band after an unlikely but fateful meeting when she was a mere teenager. Traveling around the country, they polished their act and landed in Las Vegas. By 1953 they were married despite their ostensible mismatch. She had a pure voice, perfect pitch and was strikingly beautiful in a severe, jet-black bobbed haircut. He was a madcap trumpet player with a voice of gravel and a gang of guys behind him, including the very talented Sam Butera.

Music critic Joel Selvin wrote of her in 2008: “She was the hippest doll in America, a real cool cat before they called it that. While live wire Prima put everything he had into his mad, frantic style, his taciturn counterpart never batted an eyelash, just stood around, her ankles crossed, waiting for her turn to sing. It was heat and ice, yin and yang, thrust and parry, an age-old give-and-take dressed up in the swinging style of ‘50s jive, when Prima and Smith ruled the scene from the lounge at the Sahara.

“She doesn’t see herself as an archetype of anything,” Selvin continued.



Gardner McKay and Keely Smith in Palm Springs early 1960s. PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

“Her style, as far as she is concerned, just emerged organically from her character, and Prima had the good sense to feature it, not fix it.”

Her signature hairstyle, the severe bob, happened by accident. Originally, she wore pin curls in her long hair all day before the show, only to have it straightened out within minutes under the hot lights on stage. One night, she spotted a young girl with short hair in the room where they were appearing. Smith took her into the backstage office and, with the office scissors, the girl cut Smith’s hair to look like hers. “When Louis saw it, he wanted to kill me,” she says. “But it worked out ...”

They worked five shows a night, midnight to 6 a.m., six nights a week. Their improvised dialogue between tunes made the audience laugh. Soon the glitterati were attending the hottest show in town, along with the cab drivers, waitresses, showgirls, hookers, dealers and cowboys. Frank Sinatra, Spencer Tracy, Howard Hughes, Elvis Presley, John F. Kennedy, Pat and Peter Lawford and Humphrey Bogart caught the show and loved the banter. Prima and Smith guest starred on the Ed Sullivan Show, and Dinah Shore introduced them on her show as “the greatest nightclub act in the country.”

In 1958 they recorded “That Ol’ Black



Smith joins Frank Sinatra in a recording studio. AP PHOTO

Magic,” written by Johnny Mercer and Harold Arlen and won a Grammy Award at the first ever ceremony for their efforts.

Selvin reported that the duo’s spectacular success was lost on Smith at the time. “I was in love. He was my husband. That’s what we did. At daytime, I stayed home with the kids and Louis went out and played golf.” She described him as quite the “librarian.”

Selvin wrote: “Although the Prima band specialized in rhythmically charged material, walking bass over a galloping shuffle beat, rock ‘n’ roll, really, before they called it rock ‘n’ roll, Smith thinks of herself as a ballad singer. Her solo records were largely lush affairs, many arranged by Nelson Riddle, who did the Sinatra and Nat King Cole records. She sang the only duet with Sinatra that he did during his Capitol Records years.”

That duet, written by the incomparable team of Sammy Cahn and Jimmy Van Heusen was “How Are Ya’ Fixed For Love?” The swinging tune never really caught on but is worth adding to your playlist.

In interviews years later, Smith would recount that Nat King Cole was her favorite act to see when she wasn’t working. She also idolized Ella Fitzgerald when she was growing up and said

getting Fitzgerald’s autograph was the highlight of her time at the Kennedy Inaugural gala. Sinatra had organized the gala and recruited the biggest names in show business for the event, including Prima and Smith, whose marriage was by then on the rocks.

She divorced Prima and within a few years married Jimmy Bowen, who was producing hit records with Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin for Reprise records. Afraid to go out on her own, it was another desert dweller, a neighbor, Dinah Shore, who helped her feel comfortable as a solo act on Shore’s television show.

Smith would live in Palm Springs for more than thirty years, and her swinging recording of Slim Gaillard’s “Palm Springs Jump” would make her name synonymous with the town. The song appeared on her 1999 album “Swing, Swing, Swing.” The record’s title was a fun pun on Prima’s famous composition and the Benny Goodman anthem “Sing, Sing, Sing.” It was her first recording session in more than 15 years. At the age of 68, backed by the 17-piece Frank Capp Orchestra, Smith was dynamic and powerful. And the tune is pure exuberance.

The irreverent lyrics were delivered in her inimitable style: “You better get your luggage packed / Meet you by the railroad track / Shuckin’ and jivin’ swing / Everybody’s jumping down to Palm Springs / Riding like a buckaroo! / Play-in’ tennis, swimmin’ too! / Listen to the cowboy sing / Everybody’s jumping down to Palm Springs / If you want a dancin’ song, better bring some cabbage / long / Filthy lucre is the thing / For everybody jumpin’ down to Palm Springs!”

Smith’s superb voice and sense of swing evidenced on the tune won her the sobriquet of “The Female Sinatra.” The mantle of her stage personae had been adopted by Sonny and Cher, who a decade after her would be the hottest Vegas act. (Although Cher never copied the short haircut.)

From Palm Springs years later, Smith would reflect: “I was far from hip and cool. I’m basically a square. I’ve led a very normal life.” Hardly.

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