

Perry Como: *Dream Along with Me*

BY CHUCK SCHADEN

During the late 1980s and early 1990s Perry Como would leave his Jupiter, Florida home twice a year, three weeks at a time, to perform concerts throughout the country.

In the fall of 1991 he was starring at the Star Plaza Theatre in Merrillville, Indiana, outside of Chicago. As he made his entrance, the audience in the jam-packed theatre stood and cheered his arrival. Perry seemed slightly embarrassed by the instant outpouring of affection from his fans, but covered it nicely when he said, "You scared me half to death. I thought maybe you were leaving."

He need not have worried. Perry Como's easy-going style developed, at first, as a band vocalist, grew as a recording artist and radio singer, and matured as a super-star on television, endearing him to audiences for more than half a century.

At one point during his Merrillville show, after singing many of his hit songs, Perry casually walked from the stage and down the few steps to be closer to his audience. One could hear a collective gasp from his mostly mature fans as they were treated to an even closer look at the singer.

What they saw was a lean, tanned, physically fit, handsome show business icon whose voice and appearance had changed little, if at all, over the years.



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As Perry walked towards the audience, he began another song and started moving about the rows, shaking hands with a lady here, a gentleman there, again and again. When he finished the song, there was a special warmth to the resounding applause that followed, an extended round of appreciation that must have told him how much his fans respected him and how they considered him to be a friend of many years.

As the large on-stage orchestra started another number, someone in the audience called out, "How old are you, Perry?"

Perry smiled, paused for just a second, then said, "I'll be 80 next spring."

Another gasp from the crowd, a decidedly over-50 crowd, followed by another burst of applause and cheers. They could not believe that he was going to be 80. He didn't look 80. How could Perry Como be 80 years old? And, if *he* is going to be 80, how old are *we*?

Perry was in the audience as he began his next song, still shaking hands, when a man from the back of the theatre slowly walked down the aisle, towards Perry, and extended his hand to him. Perry shook the man's hand. That man was followed by a woman, then another woman, then a couple, who also wanted to shake Perry's hand, to make contact for a second or two with the singer who had been such a big part of their lives. Perry responded by warmly greeting them until he looked up and saw that the aisles of the theatre were filled with men and women who had spontaneously left their seats and were now slowly, orderly, walking towards him, seeking to get a closer look, a chance to shake his hand, and perhaps an opportunity to say "thank you."

Perry smiled his warm smile and raised his hand, palm facing towards the approaching people. "I appreciate it," he said. "But now I have

to finish this song on stage. Thank you all."

As he turned towards the steps to return to the stage, his fans in the aisles stopped and slowly returned to their seats, having been just a bit closer to Perry Como on that day.

The mutual respect between Perry and his fans was evident. And it was true. *He didn't look 80!*

Pierino Roland Como was born in Canonsburg, a small mining town in Pennsylvania on May 18, 1912. He was one of

Pietro and Lucia Como's thirteen children, the first to be a citizen of the United States by birth.

His youthful ambition was to become a barber, the best barber in Canonsburg, and at age 11 he was an apprentice sweeping floors and stropping razors in Steve Fragapane's three-chair barber shop.

At age 14 he had his own shop which he worked after school hours and even employed two additional barbers. Following

graduation from high school he worked the shop full time, shaving, cutting hair and singing to his customers who, along with others in the community, appreciated his vocal talent. By the early 1930s, in the midst of the Great Depression, he was making as much as \$125 a week.

In 1933, while on a short vacation in Cleveland, Ohio, Perry decided to test his singing talent by auditioning for Freddy Carlone whose local band played dates through-

out Ohio. Carlone liked what he heard and offered him a job as vocalist for \$28 a week.

The young singer was flattered, but thought it imprudent to give up his sure-thing barbering career for that of a band singer, especially during those hard times. But his parents encouraged him to take the job, convincing him that if he couldn't make a career singing, he could always go back to the barber shop.

So in 1933 he accepted Freddy Carlone's offer, took the \$28 a week, and also took a



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bride, his childhood sweetheart, Roselle Belline. For the next three years he toured the Midwest with the band and his bride.

In 1936, in Warren, Ohio, Perry met well-known bandleader Ted Weems who was looking for a singer to replace Art Jarrett. Weems offered the job to Perry who eagerly accepted the offer to sing with a better-known band at an even better \$50 more per week. And even better than that, the Weems band was making records for Decca and broadcasting regularly on the radio. The band's home base was Chicago and was heard weekly on *Fibber McGee and Molly* broadcasts from NBC studios in the Merchandise Mart in 1936 and 1937. In 1940 and 1941 Perry and the Weems' band was part of Garry Moore's *Beat the Band* broadcasts which also featured singer Marvel (Marilyn) Maxwell and whistler Elmo Tanner.

The band broke up in 1943 when Ted Weems entered the army in World War II. Tired of traveling and with his wife Roselle at home since the birth of their first child in 1940, Perry decided to return to Canonsburg and open another barber shop.

But he did not accurately measure the strength of the exposure he had received



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from singing with Ted Weems. While he was negotiating a lease on a new barber shop, he received a call from the General Artists Corporation in New York offering him his own radio show (for \$100 per week) on CBS plus a recording contract with RCA Victor. He wasn't sure if he should take them up on the offer, again passing up the security of barbering. Roselle convinced him to sign with the agent, saying "You can always get another barber shop if it doesn't work out!"

He was being heard Monday through Friday afternoons on the CBS sustaining series *Perry Como For a Little While*.

A Musicians Union recording ban was in effect when Perry's first record for RCA was scheduled. No orchestra was permitted to record until James C. Petrillo's union and the record



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Doll Face (1945)
Perry Como, Vivian Blaine

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companies resolved their differences, so Perry recorded "Goodbye Sue" with only a vocal chorus to accompany him on his first recording as a solo artist. The musicians' recording ban was over when, two years later, in 1945, Perry recorded "Till the End of Time," his first chart-topping million-seller. That same year he also had a hit recording of "Prisoner of Love" and in 1946 "Surrender" topped the record charts as did "Chi-Baba, Chi-Baba" in 1947 and "A You're Adorable" and "Some Enchanted Evening" both in 1949.

Meanwhile, he was signed by Chesterfield Cigarettes to co-star on the *Supper Club* broadcasts on NBC.

Perry was heard in the quarter-hour radio program from 1944-1949 every Monday, Wednesday and Friday night while Jo Stafford appeared on

Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Hollywood beckoned while Perry's popularity was soaring. He signed with Twentieth Century Fox and appeared in a trio of films co-starring Vivian Blaine and Carmen Miranda: *Something for the Boys* (1944), *Doll Face* (1945), and *If I'm Lucky* (1946). He also appeared in MGM's *Words and Music* (1948) a screen biography of Rodgers and Hart with Mickey Rooney and Tom Drake. The films were fine showcases for Perry, but they proved to him and to his growing legion of fans that he was more of a singer than he was an actor. Obviously, he was more comfortable at being himself.

Fans were lining up to see Perry Como, the singer, whenever he played in presentation houses around the country. He was making enough money from those personal appearances that he would never again consider a career in barbering, but for years he kept up his membership in the Barber's Guild, "...just in case." Indicating that he would always be welcome in his hometown, the Canonsburg City Fathers changed the name of Third Street, where he used to have his barber shop, to Perry Como Avenue. The dedication ceremony was tremendous and the schools declared a holiday for the occasion.

In the summer of 1947 he traveled the



Words and Music (1948)
**Ann Sothorn, Marshall Thompson, Tom Drake,
 Perry Como, Mickey Rooney**

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country, making personal appearances. He played to big crowds at the Chicago Theatre (on a bill with singer Marion Hutton and Lloyd Shaffer and the orchestra on stage plus Elizabeth Taylor starring in *Cynthia* on screen). According to *Variety*, the show business publication, Perry earned \$31,000 for his week in Chicago, \$27,000 in Cleveland, \$26,500 in Boston,

\$17,500 in Atlantic City, and \$40,000 at the Paramount Theatre in New York.

Como fans who couldn't get to the theatres heard him on the radio and saw him after he made his television debut in 1948 on the video version of the Chesterfield-sponsored *Supper Club* on NBC-TV (simulcast on radio and TV). In 1950 his three-times-a-week show moved to CBS television as *The Perry Como Show*.

On September 15, 1955, in an hour-long

Art Hellyer Remembers Perry Como

The year 1947 was very exciting for me. On New Year's Day I started my professional radio career on WKNA, "the Voice of the Kanawha Valley, Charleston, West Virginia." On March 14 I was married to "the lovely" Elaine Miller and together we spent the first 51 years of my radio career. And later that year I first met Perry Como.

Ten years earlier, in February, 1937, I would hear him crooning with Theodore (Ted) Angus Weems and his orchestra from the "world's most beautiful ballroom, Andrew and William Karzas' Trianon on

Chicago's Southwest Side" on WGN. I was an eighth grader at the time, and little did I dream I would ever meet Perry Como.

When I did meet him, in 1947, I was a "DJ" on WISN in Milwaukee. Rocky Rolfe, the RCA Victor A&R rep for the Midwest, brought to me the first of many RCA luminaries it would be my pleasure to interview over the years.

I was nervous at first, but from the moment I met Perry Como I was perfectly at ease. Bing Crosby had dubbed Perry "the man who invented casual" and he

was not only that, he was the most charming person I've ever met. I was still playing his monster hit of 1946, "Prisoner of Love," and he was plugging two more records that were on their way to huge sales in 1947: "Chi-Baba" and "When you Were Sweet Sixteen."

That meeting led to a lifelong friendship because Perry Como stayed in touch over the decades that followed.



He once spent an entire Sunday with me in the early 1950s as my guest on my shows on seven different Chicago radio stations. We zipped

from WIND to WMAQ to WGN to WLS to WAIT to WCFL to WJJD. We moved from taxi to taxi during this marathon, and from elevator to elevator. And each cabbie and each elevator operator had to have the pleasure of being introduced to Perry. At one point he pulled me off to the side and said, "Art, do you do this every day?" I replied, "No, just on Saturday and Sunday." Perry looked at me, made the Sign of the Cross, and said, "Oh, thank God."

And he meant it. Lovely man, Perry Como. He made us all so happy.



The Perry Como TV Show (1955-63)
"Letters... we get letters"

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format, *The Perry Como Show* premiered on NBC-TV and Perry settled in for what became an eight-year milestone in the history of television. The show featured Mitchell Ayers and the orchestra, the Ray Charles Singers, the Louis DaProne Dancers (1955-60), the Peter Gennaro Dancers (1960-63), announcer Frank Gallop ("Reallllly now!"), and many guest stars.

The show opened as Perry sang his TV theme, "Dream along with me, I'm on my way to a star. Dream along, dream along, leave your worries where they are." A highlight of each broadcast was a request segment introduced by girl singers: "Letters, we get letters, we get stacks and stacks of letters..." and then: "Dear Perry. Will you be so kind, to fill a request and sing the song we love best?" Each week's guest would make his contribution to the scene and Perry would often close with a hymn or serious number.

Tom Shales of the Washington Post recently wrote, "He looked the way he sounded; casually handsome, always comfortable with himself. If there hadn't al-

ready been cardigan sweaters, they would have had to be invented so Como could have something to wear. He wanted to make you glad you'd met him. He behaved like a guest who hoped he'd be welcome into your living room again next week."

While Perry was entertaining millions via television, he was selling millions of RCA records. In an unprecedented 50-year career with the record company, his music was played by disc jockeys from coast to coast and on phonographs in homes around the world. And he racked up another stack of Number One hits: "Hoop Dee-Do," "If," "Don't Let the Stars Get in Your Eyes," "No Other Love," "Wanted," "Hot Diggity (Dog Ziggity Boom)," "Round and Round," and "Catch a Falling Star"

When his TV variety show ended in 1963, Perry appeared on six to eight specials each year until, finally, he slowed down to just one—at Christmastime—per year. He was still recording into the '70s and '80 and had a big hit in 1970 with the million-seller "It's Impossible." He continued his concert performances on a se-

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verely limited basis, but after seven decades in show business he was essentially retired, happily spending his time with his wife in their Florida home.

He lost Roselle in August, 1998, when she passed away less than two weeks after they marked their 65th wedding anniversary.

Perry Como died on May 12, 2001. A funeral Mass was held on May 18, the day he would have turned 89.

He is gone, but he leaves a treasured legacy in his recordings, in his radio and TV appearances, and in our hearts.

He will never be far away. ■

Tune in TWTD August 11 for a Perry Como tribute.

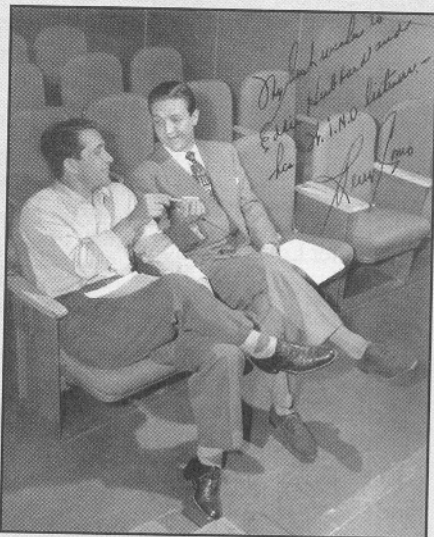
Eddie Hubbard Remembers Perry Como

I got to know Perry Como fairly well because of our mutual sponsor, Chesterfield Cigarettes.

I broadcast my local *ABC Club* from Chicago and the account executive would fly me into New York to do the announcing chores for Perry's announcer Martin Block who, once in a while, would take a few days off.

In those days Perry's *Supper Club* was actually performed twice, once for the East Coast and again for the West Coast. The first show was at 7 pm EST and the next at 11 pm EST. The hours in between we devoted to listening and critiquing the first show, and then to dinner.

Here I was on the network on the Perry Como show... my boyhood dream come true.



When Perry introduced me as "...our country cousin from Chicago, Eddie HOWARD" I was crushed. When we heard the playback Perry came over and did all but cry with his apology. I assured him it had happened often because Eddy Howard was a popular entertainer.

On the later broadcast, when it came time for his intro of me, he stopped reading from the script and began to ad lib, which was not Perry's strong point. "Ladies and gentlemen, our country cousin from Chicago is here to bring you a word from our sponsor while Martin takes a day off. Say hello to Eddie HUBBARD, our Chesterfield voice of the Windy City. How are our cigarettes selling in the Midwest, Eddie?"

I answered, "At last survey we became the leader... Number One... just like your records, Perry."

"Mine is Number One? That's good to hear."

And before I went into the scripted commercial, I ad libbed, "Wanna know who was Number Two?"

Perry asked, "Who?"

"Eddie Howard," I replied. This caused a chuckle from the band because they knew of Como's goof on the first show.

I was fortunate enough to spend ten years under contract to the cigarette company and had the pleasure of announcing the show many times after. Perry Como never forgot the incident and we joked about it often.

When I told the story to Eddy Howard, he got a kick out of it as well. Now both are gone, but the tender memories remain.