

BING CROSBY

America's Favorite Crooner

BY TERRY BAKER

Through the years our country has produced a large pool of vocal talent. Any list of these performers would not be complete without including the man we know simply as Bing. Not only did Bing Crosby establish himself as a major singing star but also a radio and movie star thus becoming one of our nation's most popular performers.

Bing entered the world on May 2, 1904 with the moniker Harry Lillis Crosby named after his father. There have been several accounts of how he got his nickname Bing. Crosby's own recollection is that when he was eight he became hooked on a local comic strip called the "Bingville Bugle." One of the characters in the strip was named Bingo. Crosby dropped the o and was called Bing from that point on.

Born in Tacoma, Washington, his family moved to Spokane in 1906. His father took a job as a bookkeeper with a local brewery while his mother, Katherine had her hands full raising Bing and his host of brothers and sisters. It's ironic that Bing's father, whose job was handling money could not manage their family's finances. That job fell to his mother along with the task of providing discipline. Kate saw to it that the Crosby brood stayed in line and were taught strong traditional values.

One very important thing that Harry Crosby did provide for his family was an easy-going outlook on life. It was his theory that you should not worry about anything, just take life as it comes and everything would work out. It was a lifestyle that Bing would emulate and would later become his show business trademark.

It was also Mr. Crosby who introduced Bing and the rest of the family to the joys of music. Both Harry and Kate loved music and it was this shared love that initially brought them together. Wanting to share these pleasures with his children, Harry took his first check from the brewery and bought the family a phonograph. Later he purchased a piano and while both sisters learned to play, Bing and his brothers never did.

Bing's childhood was a normal one. He loved sports, especially baseball and football and was an above average student as well. After graduating from a local grade school he attended Gonzaga High School. Gonzaga was a Catholic school run by the fathers of Gonzaga College (which Bing would also attend). The money situation was rough during these years. Since their father made very little it was up to the Crosby boys to find part-time jobs and help the family financially.

Bing held down a host of jobs through those years. For several years he found himself rising at the crack of dawn to deliver papers for the *Spokesman-Review*. Later he worked for Weyerhaeuser Timber Company locating new roads for the booming logging industry. He even worked briefly with his father at the brewery. The job he most enjoyed though was working as an assistant in the prop department at the Auditorium Theater in Spokane. It was here that Bing had his first opportunity to see the world of show business close up.

It was while still in high school that Bing began his musical career. Bing and several fellow students formed a band and per-



formed around the high school area. Crosby sang and even played the drums a little. In 1921, during his first year at college, Bing joined a group called the Musicaladers. This group included Al Rinker who would work with Bing for many years to come.

Al had the unique ability of listening to records and memorizing the arrangements. The rest of the band would learn them and then play them from memory. It was a good thing their memories were strong because none of them knew how to read music. They weren't great musicians either but their ability to mimic the big name performers gave them a different sound and

made them quite popular throughout the area.

The Musicaladers were together for almost two years before they broke up. One member moved and two others transferred to another college. Only Bing, Al and Al's brother Miles were left. Since Miles didn't want to put another band together Bing and Al were left to go it alone. Their talents enabled them to get many bookings including a long run performing at the Clemmer Theater in Spokane where they performed their act prior to the movie presentation.

Bing still continued his education and during his junior year he switched his

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studies to law. He even found employment, working part-time at a nearby law office. Though he tried, his heart just wasn't in it. He wanted to sing and since he was making as much money performing with Al as he was with his part-time job, singing made economic sense as well. The boys left Gonzaga in 1925 and headed south to seek their fortune.

It took them a week to drive to Los Angeles. In fact they had to hitchhike the last 80 miles but arrive they did. While in Los Angeles they stayed with Al's sister, Mildred. Mildred Bailey (as she was known professionally) was a talented songstress and well on her way to becoming a star in her own right. It was Mildred who got them their first audition in town.

Bing and Al got to perform their act for the head of the Fanchon and Marco circuit, a group that put on shows up and down the west coast. They performed well and were booked into the Boulevard Theatre in Los Angeles. From there they travelled the rest of the circuit earning \$250 to \$300 a week with an act known as "Two Boys and a Piano."

After the show closed, Bing and Al joined the Paramount-Publix circuit and began working at the Metropolitan Theater back in Los Angeles. While there the boys were spotted by Paul Whiteman who liked what he saw. After auditioning, Bing and Al signed a contract to join Whiteman and his orchestra on tour.

It was 1927, just two years after they left Spokane, and already they found themselves working with one of the top bands in the country. Bing and Al joined Whiteman in Chicago and their act went over well as it did in other cities they played. However when they got to New York they received their first taste of failure. Perhaps New Yorkers were too sophisticated for their style of music but Bing and Al just could not win the crowds over.

Whiteman did not want to let them go so he tried his best to find other things for



THE RHYTHM BOYS

them to do. For a while they were out in the theater lobby performing for the overflow crowds and those waiting for the next show. They even worked briefly manning the theater curtains. Whiteman was also able to use them as vocal accompanists on several of his recordings. It wasn't exactly what Bing and Al had been expecting but at least they were working.

When the band moved on to Philadelphia, Whiteman gave the boys another chance to perform on stage. Out of New York, Bing and Al got their confidence back and performed well. Upon returning to New York, Crosby and Rinker were teamed up with local pianist Harry Barris and became known as "Paul Whiteman's Rhythm Boys."

Their act consisted mostly of novelty tunes and it went over big. As their popularity grew they found themselves with plenty of outside work. They performed at many a dinner party and also recorded a song that Barris had wrote.

The Rhythm Boys were flushed with success but, as often happens in such a

case, the group become lazy. They rehearsed little, if any, learned no new material and were constantly arguing about who was the boss. Whiteman was very upset with this behavior and refused to take them along on his next tour. Instead they were booked on a vaudeville tour through the Midwest. Their attitude still didn't change though as they performed poorly and sometimes didn't show up for their engagements.

When the boys returned to Whiteman's band in 1930 they got the opportunity to perform in their first motion picture, "The King of Jazz." It was by no means an epic film but it gave Bing the chance to appear before the camera for the first time. Shortly thereafter Bing and Whiteman became involved in a salary dispute and Crosby left the band.

Working for Paul Whiteman had been a wonderful opportunity for Bing. Not only had he greatly furthered his musical career but also enriched his personal life as well. It was while working with The Rhythm Boys in Los Angeles that he met his future wife, Wilma Wyatt, better known as Dixie Lee. Dixie had come to California after winning a singing contest in Chicago. She was working at Fox Studios when she first saw Bing perform. They hit it off immediately and within two years they were married.

Dixie's studio did not think much of her relationship with Bing. Fox had big plans for her films. They certainly didn't want her to be tied down just yet, especially to some nobody like Bing. Dixie however had no desire to be a movie star. She simply wanted to be a loving wife and mother and Bing was the man she had chosen to be with. She achieved her wishes becoming a source of support and encouragement for Bing as well as a devoted mother to their four sons.

When Bing left Paul Whiteman in 1930, Al and Harry followed him. It did not take long for the trio to find work. Orchestra leader Gus Arnheim was forming a band to perform at the Coconut Grove in Los

Angeles and asked the boys if they would join him. They agreed and created a comedy and singing routine with two other performers on the show.

What really made this a golden opportunity for Bing was the fact that he was able to sing for a radio audience for the first time. Each night for two hours the Coconut Grove broadcast their show throughout the west coast. This exposure would greatly increase the group's popularity.

It was while performing there that the



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boys recorded their first big hit. It was a song written by Harry entitled "I Surrender Dear." The song became so popular that audiences asked them to sing it several times each evening.

Everything seemed to be going right for the group but near the end of their engagement Bing once again found himself in a dispute with an owner over finances. When Crosby quit this time he was on his own. Al and Harry moved into other areas of the music field and Bing found himself in Hollywood making movie shorts for \$600 each.

Crosby did not really have the appearance to be a movie star. He was a rather average looking man with somewhat large ears. Although short on looks, Bing's relaxed easy going style came across well on screen whether he was acting or singing. Through his appearances in these film shorts Crosby's popularity continued to grow. This was but a small indication of the film success he was to have later on. At this point Bing finally felt financially secure enough to support a wife and he and Dixie were married.

It was now that Bing's brother Everett entered the picture. Everett was living in Los Angeles and became Bing's unofficial agent. Knowing that radio would provide Bing with additional audience exposure, Everett approached both CBS and NBC about hiring Bing for their networks. CBS President William Paley was aware of Bing's talents and in the summer of 1931, Crosby was hired to do a fifteen minute program five nights a week. It was appropriately titled "Fifteen Minutes with Bing Crosby." He was scheduled to debut in late August but a severe case of laryngitis forced his premiere program back to September 2. The show was sustaining at first but as Bing's ratings improved *Cremo Cigars* picked up the sponsorship.

During the first season on radio, Bing supposedly began adding the "bub-bub-bub-boos" to his songs. Even Crosby did

not remember if this was true but according to the story, Bing accidentally dropped his sheet music during one of his broadcasts. He couldn't pick up the music fast enough so he replaced the words with "bub-bub-bub-boos." The audience liked the sound and Bing continued to do it from that point on. Truth or not, that does make for a good story.

While performing on radio Bing still continued his stage and film career. For seven months in 1932 he worked at the Paramount Theater as their emcee. He also made three films that year for Paramount including "The Big Broadcast of 1932" with other top radio stars. Later on that year Crosby found himself back east working at the Capitol Theater in New York. It was here that Bing got the opportunity to work with Bob Hope for the first time. Hope was the master of ceremonies and Crosby was called on to sing a few of his songs. The two also performed a few comedy sketches together. Bing and Bob worked well as a team and it became the start of a long personal and professional relationship. Through the years the two made frequent appearances on each other's radio programs developing almost a Benny-Allen-like feud as Bing would comment on Bob's ski nose and Hope would counter with a remark about Crosby's ears.

During the 1940's Crosby and Hope raised millions of dollars for the war effort through their numerous benefit performances. They also made many trips overseas to entertain the troops both as a team as well as individually. Coupled with frequent appearances over *Armed Forces Radio*, their value to improving the troops' morale was immeasurable.

Of course we can't forget their seven road pictures together. Beginning with the *Road to Singapore* in 1939 to the *Road to Hong Kong* 23 years later, the boys (along with Dorothy Lamour) brought laughter to millions of moviegoers around the world. Indeed their relationship was both a friendly and profitable one, not only for them but for us as well.



BING CROSBY AND BOB HOPE

Even without Hope, Bing's movie career would flourish. By only his fifth film Crosby was one of the top box office draws. Bing appeared in mostly light romantic comedies but given the chance proved himself a talented dramatic actor. His portrayal of a Catholic priest in *Going My Way* won him critical acclaim as well as an Academy Award.

Through the mid-1960's Bing appeared in sixty feature films and there wasn't a bad one in the bunch. Of course certain ones stand out such as the aforementioned *Going My Way*, *Holiday Inn*, *The Country Girl*, *High Society* and *White Christmas*. The warmth and charm that Crosby conveyed with each performance made him one of our nation's most popular movie actors.

When Bing returned to radio in 1932 he found himself with a new sponsor, appearing twice-a-week for Chesterfield cigar-

ettes. The following year he appeared on a thirty-minute Monday night program for Woodbury Soap. In 1934 he moved to Tuesday night, still for Woodbury. Then in 1935 Crosby got his biggest radio opportunity, the chance to host NBC's popular Kraft Music Hall program. Without hesitation Bing jumped over to NBC and began hosting the show in December of 1935.

The Kraft Music Hall was a sixty-minute variety program with the emphasis on music. The relaxed atmosphere on the show made this a perfect vehicle for Crosby's talents. Bing was called on to sing a few songs, introduce and chat with the guests and in general just let his own appealing personality come thru. With Bing at the helm the show continued as the most listened-to variety show on radio. Crosby loved doing the show and remained as its host for ten years.

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It was never difficult to find performers who wanted to do the show. Money was not the reason because the pay was the lowest of all the top rated programs. But the program did mean good exposure plus the chance to work with Bing. Add to this the fact that rehearsal time was minimal. Since each performer's contribution was but a portion of the total show they only needed to rehearse their material which rarely took more than thirty minutes. Such an arrangement made appearing on Crosby's show very attractive.

Chances are whatever music you like, Bing would sooner or later feature it on the program. Whether it be jazz, opera or the sound of the big bands, Crosby offered something for everyone. Even Spike Jones and the City Slickers made their radio debut on Bing's show.

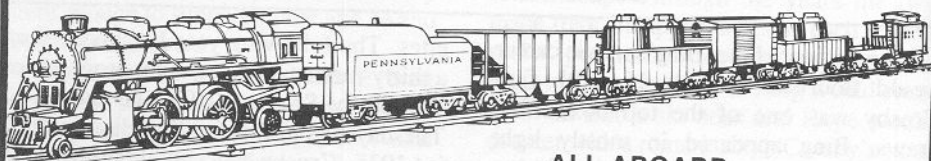
The program underwent few changes

during Crosby's stint as host. The show never moved off Thursday nights. In fact only once did the show move out of the NBC studios and that was to do a show in Bing's hometown of Spokane. Personnel also remained the same. Carroll Carroll served as the show's lone writer until 1938 then as head writer thereafter. Ken Carpenter handled the announcing chores and John Scott Trotter led the orchestra thru most of the Kraft years. Since the show relied so heavily on guest stars there were few regular performers. Those that were usually did so briefly but the list included such names as comedian Bob Burns (the Arkansas Traveler), musical comic Victor Borge and singers Peggy Lee, Connie Boswell and Ginny Simms.

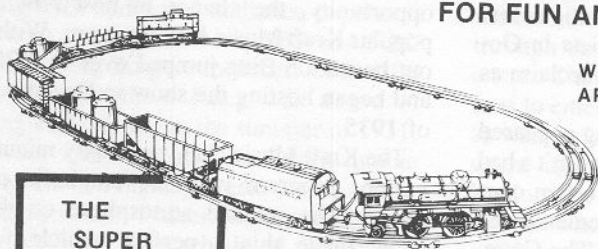
The only significant changes that affected the program was its switch to a thirty-minute format in 1942 and the loss of Bing's theme song. "When the Blue of the Night Meets the Gold of the Day" had

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become synonymous with Crosby's program but when the publishing group ASCAP pulled their songs from radio in a dispute, Bing had to find a new theme.

By the time Crosby ended his profitable association with Kraft in 1946 he had become one of the most popular performers on radio. The Kraft Music Hall was still one of the top twenty rated shows on the air when he departed.

In addition to his radio and film success, Crosby's good fortune would continue in the recording studio. Under the guidance of Decca Records' President Jack Kapp, Bing had a string of popular recordings that stretched over several decades. Kapp selected the songs and made sure that Bing did not get stuck singing just one type of music.

Crosby showed his versatility by recording all types of songs ranging from hillbilly to jazz to opera. He sang duets and made recordings with most of the top orchestras. During the war Bing recorded several patriotic songs that served to boost the spirits of all Americans both here and abroad. By giving listeners a chance to hear all of Bing's talents they did not become bored with him and Crosby was able to continue as a recording artist long after his counterparts faded away.

Of course, recording a song like "White Christmas" certainly didn't hurt. Simply put, Bing's rendition of Irving Berlin's holiday favorite has sold more copies than any other song in history. It immediately became a Christmas classic and though many artists have recorded it since, no one did it like Bing. It's one of those rare tunes that sounds as good the 50th time you've heard it as it did the first and no Christmas is complete without Bing singing "White Christmas."

In the middle of 1946 Kraft Foods tried desperately to get Bing to return to their radio program. They offered him a substantial raise and even stock in their company. But Crosby didn't need their money. He was already one of the wealthiest men in Hollywood. Bing owned a part of every



picture in which he appeared and his real estate holdings, oil ventures and other business interests made him a millionaire many times over. The one thing he wanted from Kraft they couldn't give him.

After making several appearances on the Armed Forces Radio Service program Command Performance, Bing became fascinated with the use of recordings. The AFRS would record a forty or fifty minute program and then edit it down to thirty minutes for broadcast. By doing this any mistakes or jokes that didn't go over could be eliminated and only the best material would remain. To Bing this seemed the only way to do a radio show. Not only would he be able to produce the best possible product but he could record several shows in advance. This would give Bing the chance to spend more time with his family and to pursue his favorite pastime, golf.

Unfortunately for Bing both CBS and NBC had a standing policy not to broadcast any prerecorded material. Their logic was that no audience would listen to a show unless it was done live. Also, if an

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entertainer wished to record their show, they could then sell it to any station thus eliminating the need for a network.

Undaunted, Bing decided to sell his services to any sponsor who would let his production company record his show. It would then be the sponsor's job to sell the show to a network. Eventually Philco stepped forward and purchased the program and in turn sold it to the American Broadcasting Company. ABC had been in business only six years and was anxious to try anything to compete with the established networks. The chance to grab a major star like Bing was too good to pass up. They agreed to air Bing's show with one stipulation: if his ratings dropped below 12 for any full month he would have to return to live broadcasts.

Crosby made his Philco Radio Time debut on Wednesday, October 16, 1946 with Bob Hope as his guest. Ken Carpenter continued as Bing's announcer and the show's format was basically the same as the Kraft program. Although the ratings dropped a bit throughout the season he finished with a respectable 16.1. His success prompted several other shows to begin recording and by the end of the decade nearly all programs were being recorded for later broadcast.

Bing stayed with Philco until 1949 when he moved back to CBS, still on Wednesdays, for Chesterfield. In 1952 General Electric picked up the sponsorship and moved him to Thursdays. It was in November of that year that Bing's wife Dixie passed away due to cancer. This left a huge void in his life but he continued to work during that tough time.

Bing stayed with General Electric through 1954. For his final two years on radio he hosted a fifteen minute songfest five nights a week for various sponsors. Due to the impact of television, radio audiences had been in decline for several years and Crosby decided to call it quits in 1956. Bing was one of but a handful of big name

stars that remained on network radio till the end.

Throughout the early 1950's Bing knew that television would be a big part of his future. All the networks wanted his talents as did the sponsors. When Crosby signed his radio contract with General Electric they even included a clause which allowed them to be the sole sponsor of any television special that Bing decided to do.

Bing looked forward to trying out this new medium but did not want to tie himself to a weekly series. Crosby had far too many prior commitments and besides that, Bing was afraid that too much exposure would cause viewers to grow tired of him. He was content to appear in a few specials each year, a la Bob Hope.

Crosby did make one attempt at a weekly series. In 1964 he starred in a situation comedy called, what else, "The Bing Crosby Show" which ended after one season. In 1971 he turned down the role of Lt. Columbo in that soon-to-be-popular police drama because it would have interfered with his golf game. Bing's remaining contributions to television came from behind the scenes as his production company developed such shows as Ben Casey and Hogan's Heroes.

Crosby remained very active in his later years. In addition to keeping an eye on his many business investments, he devoted much of his time to his new wife and family. Bing married actress Kathryn Grant in 1957 and they added two more boys and a girl to the Crosby clan.

He continued to host his annual Pro-Am golf tournament that brought together the finest players from around the world. Bing loved the game so much that he even traveled around the world just to play on the finest courses. It seems appropriate that when Bing passed away he was engaged in his favorite activity. In 1977 while shooting a round of golf, Crosby suffered a heart attack. He was 73 years old. Bing's unique blend of talent and style had made him an audience favorite throughout the world. He will never be forgotten.