

REMEMBERING MEL TORMÉ

Mel Tormé may be best remembered for composing “The Christmas Song” (“Chestnuts roasting on an open fire...”), written on a sweltering July afternoon in 1946. Tormé took the song to Nat King Cole who recorded it with his trio and made it a hit. Since then, the song has become a holiday standard. But Tormé was infinitely more than the writer of one famous song; he was also an arranger, drummer, film and television actor, author, and primarily a vocalist of remarkable gifts with a repertoire of over five thousand songs.



Tormé around the time he composed 'The Christmas Song'



Bill Curtis

Melvin Howard Tormé was born in Chicago in 1925. He was a child prodigy, performing professionally at the age of four and acting on radio in his adolescence. Amazingly, Tormé did not have formal musical training. Most of his musical abilities came from working with the big bands of the 1940s and writing arrangements. In 1944, Tormé formed the Mel-Tones,

a jazz-influenced vocal quintet he met in college. He started to sing solo in 1947 in New York clubs like the Copa. Fred Robbins, a local disc jockey christened him, “The Velvet Fog,” because of the velvety tone of his voice, a moniker Tormé detested and one which haunted him for years.

Unlike many pop singers of his generation who followed Bing Crosby’s lead, Tormé vocal style was strongly influenced by jazz, although Tormé could deliver a ballad with the best of them and capture the emotional heart of a lyric. When it came to scat

singing—vocal improvisation to wordless syllables— he was in Ella Fitzgerald’s league. The rise of rock ‘n’ roll sidelined Tormé (and many of his contemporaries), and his popularity declined in the 1960s. He enjoyed something of a renaissance in the 1970s and made some of his finest recordings during the 1980s and 1990s



Tormé in concert (courtesy of The Range Place)



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for the Concord label, especially in a partnership he forged with pianist George Shearing. Tormé's voice became deeper and richer over his more than 65-year career, and he managed to maintain an amazing vocal range and breath control that rivaled Frank Sinatra's.

If you are unfamiliar with Tormé's work, here are three recordings that showcase him at his best in early and late years:

- Tormé Sings Astaire (with The Marty Paich Dek-Tette, Bethlehem Records, 1956)
- Mel Tormé and Friends (recorded at Marty's, New York City, Finesse Records, 1981)
- An Evening With George Shearing & Mel Tormé (Concord Jazz, 1982)

Tormé never achieved the popularity of a Frank Sinatra or Tony Bennett, perhaps due to his jazz influenced style. But he did build a devoted following who regard him as a "musician's singer." In a 1981 *New Yorker* profile, Tormé recalled that his longtime manager, Carlos Gastel, told him, "You will never be the mass star you want to be...but there is a vast minority of people out there who will always support your work." This writer is one appreciative member of the minority who miss Mel Tormé every December when once again, someone sings "The Christmas Song."



Tormé scatting with Ella Fitzgerald at the 1967 Grammy Awards

FLASH NEWS

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