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Little Boy Lost

Little boy false
in search of little boy true,
will you be ever done traveling,
always unraveling you . . . ?

— from Pieces of Dreams, aka Little Boy Lost, by Alan and Marilyn Bergman

When at the age of nineteen, I thought I might want to be a writer, I reflected, "Who'd want to read anything I'd write?" What my mind replied immediately—and correctly—was, "I don't know the answer. But I do know you'd better never ask the question again." It's like not looking down when you're climbing a cliff face or walking a high wire. Don't even ask the question. It'll make you fall.

Miles Davis said, "It takes a long time to sound like yourself."

All art begins in imitation. Even speech begins in imitation. In early Dizzy Gillespie, you hear the influence of Roy Eldridge, in whom in turn you will hear Louis Armstrong. But other forces come into Dizzy's playing, and eventually he became an extraordinarily original artist, although every once in a while you'll hear a touch of Eldridge. Miles Davis told me, "I got it all from Dizzy," though in truth he got some of it from Bobby Hackett (who got some of it from Bix Beiderbecke), and from Freddy Webster and Harry James. But in time Miles became unmistakably Miles. You can distinguish him (even from his most faithful imitators) in a bar or even less.

Some of these thoughts passed through my mind recently when I was musing on the career and work of Bobby Darin. A four-CD retrospective on the Rhino label is most interesting, most instructive. But it has peculiar liner notes. Several writers contributed to them, but the major piece is adapted from an article in the December 16, 1994, *San Jose Mercury News* by Michael Oricchio, described as a "lifelong Bobby Darin fan."

The tenor of the notes, including an insert by Darin's son Dodd, is defensive when it is not downright aggressive and aggrieved. It does precisely what it should not be doing: it draws attention to Darin's unresolved eclecticism, his failure, finally, to reconcile all his influences and inspirations into a single personality.

Chip evident on his shoulder, Oricchio writes:

"While now relegated to the long kitsch-laced pantheon of faded and forgotten finger-popping hepcats, Bobby Darin — singer, songwriter, music publisher, actor, star—had a life and career as wonderfully incongruous and brilliantly idiosyncratic as the tune for which he's best remembered.

"Darin died . . . of a heart condition he tried to outrun most of his life and which fueled his impatient, do-it-all-now rise to the top of the pop scene during the late '50s and early '60s. After years of faded glory, now seems as good a time as ever to finally give Darin his due as one of pop music's all-time greats.

"Ancient history, you say? Well, in a world where Tony Bennett can become one of the hottest attractions on MTV, Frank Sinatra can hit the top of the charts by recording duets with everybody from Bono to Barbra Streisand, and Darin's tunes are sneaking their way back into the country's collective consciousness through movie soundtracks and commercials, Bobby's memory seems poised for a revaluation.

"As an artist and a personality, Darin has always been misunderstood and underappreciated by the media, by other musicians, by know-it-all reviewers, by casual listeners — oh, you name it. It was that way when he was alive, and it has remained that way since the day he died."

Is there anyone left that Oricchio hasn't straight-armed?

Orrichio was born in 1963, the notes tell us; Darin died in 1973. Presumably Orrichio never met him. I did.

And musicians (and no few critics) assuredly did appreciate and understand him. Johnny Mandel, who didn't know him personally, said, "I never met anybody who worked with him who didn't respect him." Roger Kellaway, who was his accompanist, conductor and arranger in 1967 and '68, has nothing but praise for him. The late Bobby Scott, who also held that position with him, admired him considerably. And Eddie Karam, who was music director of the Darin TV specials of 1972 and '73, said, "I thought he was an enormous talent. I also think he was a very troubled guy."

In early 1960 I spent several days with Bobby in St. Louis,

hanging with him all day, having lunch and dinner with him, attending his rehearsals. He was cocky, a very brash young man, and Mel Tormé publicly criticized him for it, saying, "He reminds me of myself when I was his age." Unfortunately, in his later years, Mel let come back into evidence the self-admiration and abrasive arrogance that had apparently smouldered never far below the surface.

By coincidence, I came to hold among my friends two of Darin's accompanists, Roger Kellaway and the late Bobby Scott. I wish I had known about Darin what I later learned from them. It would have been helpful when I was interviewing him. It helps now, when I think over the things he told me and the way he behaved.

Bobby had a painful childhood. He was born Walden Robert Cassotto in the Bronx, on May 14, 1936, and, as you can tell from the name, he is in that extraordinary group of American Italian singers who have contributed more to American music than anyone seems to have noticed: Frank Sinatra, Russ Colombo, Perry Como, Al Martino, the terribly underrated and unfortunately forgotten Tommy Leonetti, Buddy Greco, Phil Brito, and the dependably embarrassing Mario Lanza.

America might be more aware of the Italian contribution to its popular music had not so many singers changed their names: Tony Bennett (Antonio Benedetto), Frankie Laine (Frank Lovecchio), Kay Ballard (Caterina Ballardo), Frankie Avalon (Francis Avaloni), Dean Martin (Dino Crocetti), Jerry Vale (Genaro Louis Vitaliano), Vic Damone (Vito Farinola), David Allyn (Albert DiLello), Frances Wayne (Charina Francesca Bertocci), Connie Francis (Concetta Rosa Maria Franconero), Dion and the Belmonts (Dion DiMucci, Fred Milano, Angelo D'Aleo, and Carlo Mastangelo, all of them from the Bronx), Alan Dale (Sigismondi), Fabian (Fabiano Forte), and even Madonna (Madonna Louise Ciccione), whom I happen to think is a pretty good singer, as rebarbatively self-exploitative as she is and meretricious as her material may be.

No immigrant group from Europe was more viciously treated in the United States than the Italians, and this often instilled in them a kind of self-doubt, an insecurity that is hard for an outsider to fathom. I've seen it time after time in Italian friends and associates, especially in New York. It seems to have vanished in the more recent generations, but in Tony Bennett's time, it was common. This is what I mean.

For all his success, I have seen that self-doubt come over Tony like a cloud. I have never liked the work of Picasso, and don't affect to understand it. But Tony, who was a good hobby painter when I first knew him and has grown into one of professional stature (Ella Fitzgerald showed me a stunning portrait of her Tony had done and given to her), was talking to me one day about Picasso. He was articulate in ways many people think he's incapable of, and pungently perceptive about art. It was a remarkable impromptu lecture, and I was gaining insight from it. And then that shadow passed over his face, and Tony said, "But who am I to be talking about Picasso?"

That is what was done to the Italians in America, and it passed even unto the second and third generations — more so in New York than Boston, for some reason, and Tony is a New York Italian. I told this story about Tony to my close buddy Julius La Rosa, and thenceforth we referred to this phenomenon of self-abnegation and doubt as the Picasso Syndrome. I'll catch him at it even now, and I'll pull him up by saying, "Hey, Julie, I don't need the Picasso Syndrome," and we'll laugh. Julie, like Tony, is a New York Italian. And so was Bobby Darin. Is that why he changed his name?

But I think name changes are dangerous. Names create impressions in people, and their impressions affect you and ultimately, subtly, your psyche. Sinatra deserved every credit for refusing to change his name. Bobby Darin selected a name that sounds WASP, more or less, though he reportedly got it off the neon sign of a Chinese restaurant. The first three letters of the word "mandarin" were burned out. *Darin* is strangely neutral, strangely bland, and had he let himself be Bobby Cassotto—well, there's a name to conjure with.

But he changed it, whether to escape an Italian identity or not, we can never know. But there was something else he may have been trying to escape. Bobby grew up, or so he thought, in a house with his mother and his older sister, but no father.

In childhood he had rheumatic fever, which left him with damage to the heart. He knew when he was eight that his life expectancy was short: he heard a doctor discussing it with a member of his family. He had, according to Roger Kellaway, a ferocious desire to live not one or two but all of his dreams in a lifetime he expected to be quite short, and he just about pulled it off. He wanted to be a singer, an actor, a guitarist, a songwriter, and he became all of them with varying degrees of success.

He attended Hunter College in New York for a time, playing drums in a school group and studying drama. He signed with Decca Records in 1956, when he was twenty, then with Atco in 1957. He had his first big hit with a song of his own, a humorous rock-and-roll novelty called *Splish Splash*, the following year, when he was twenty-two. Thus his career was moving much faster than that of Sinatra before him. He had several more rock hits before recording *Mack the Knife* in 1959. An arranger I knew said, "I've got a great idea for a chart on *Mack the Knife*. I'm going to modulate down a half step for every chorus." Clumsy chart or not, the recording was a huge hit, followed by another that year: *Beyond the Sea*. Departing from his rock-and-roll image, Darin did both

tunes at a medium tempo in a thumb-snapping Sinatra style.

He broke into film acting in 1961 with a comedy called *Come September*, directed by Robert Mulligan and starring Rock Hudson and Gina Lollobrigida. Also in the cast was Sandra Dee, whose real name is Alexandra Zuck, and you'd change it too if it were yours. Darin married her that year; and as far as I can figure it, that was not long after I spent those days with him in St. Louis. He was playing the Chase Hotel.

This was shortly after a review in the *New York Times* that said, "On records, the most striking instance of the renaissance of showmanship can be found in the work of Bobby Darin, not only because he is a young singer with all the assurance, projection, and casual craftiness of an old pro but —what is most remarkable—because he gained his first popularity in the rock 'n' roll scramble."

This, remember, was not long before the arrival of the Beatles, the proliferation of rock groups, and the ingenious and only too successful campaign of the record industry publicists to define the most odious trash as an art form. What raised the eyebrows of older folk, including me (I was a senescent thirty-two years old) was that a denizen of rock should actually turn out to have some talent. Darin wasn't really the first to attempt the transition. Tommy Sands actually sang rather well. And in later years performers from the rock and pop and country worlds would essay the "standards", among them Carley Simon and Willie Nelson, with varying degrees of skill. But Darin was good at the "good" material, the quality songs. Very good. No doubt the professionals thought Darin was the man who could lead the kids back to music. That was always their hype: that the rock-and-roll fans would develop a taste for the better things, which is like arguing that the young exposed only to Spiderman would through these readings progress to a taste for Shakespeare and Kipling. If we have learned anything in the culture of the last forty or so years it is that exposure to crap leads to a permanent taste for crap, and young fans of the young rock groups were still following them around at the end of the century, when both had grown grizzled. Darin was different.

A New York columnist—if memory serves, it was the malicious Dorothy Kilgallen—took a smack at Darin, saying that other young singers were getting tired of hearing him say how big he was going to be. He took issue with her, and it must be said that Kilgallen was never scrupulously careful to be accurate. Rumor was good enough for her.

"I have friends in this business from Frankie Avalon and Fabian to Sammy Davis, Jr.," Bobby said to me in St. Louis. "I can get something from any of them. You can learn from anybody, if it's only what *not* to do. Fabian and all of them knew from the start that I wanted to progress beyond the rock-and-roll phase. I've been preparing for this all my life.

"I contend that it takes the kids to put you on top, and the same kids as grownups to keep you there.

"I love the business. It's not the singing. It's being a performer and being accepted."

I did not know then about his vanished father and the fact that his sister was his mother; for that matter, at the time even he did not know about the latter. His comment makes much sense in the light of his uncertain childhood—and heart condition.

"I think," he said, "'Thank you for recognizing this part of me, but forgive me, I've got to get back to work on the next part.' It's a sort of constant segue.

"Actually, I never wanted to be a singer. I wanted to be an actor. And I still do. I was a song writer, trying to get into the business. I made a demo of one of my own tunes, and George Schenk, a personal manager, heard it and said, 'Do you want to sing?' I said, 'Sure. Anything to get into the business.' I made four records for Decca, then went to Atco. Nothing much happened at first. Then I did *Splish-Splash.*

"That's when I learned that you have to find out what John Q. Public wants."

Splish-Splash, a tongue-in-cheek rock song, seen in retrospect—and certainly in the age of rap songs advocating murder, rape, mayhem, homophobia, cop-killing and other small amusements — has a sweet innocence about it, and a not inconsiderable charm. It was followed by more hits, including *Queen of the Hop,* aimed obviously at the adolescent market, and by *Beyond the Sea*, an English-language adaptation of the Charles Trenet song *La Mer*. The English lyric is adequate; in French the song is a masterpiece, a vision not of love but simply of the sea itself. I always wanted to meet Trenet. He died earlier this year at eighty-seven.

The industry specialists estimated that Darin would make half a million dollars in 1960, which would be a much larger figure, obviously, in today's dollars, though not as much as the million a year Sinatra was making in the mid-1940s. Bobby told me that by the time the government and commission payments and other expenses got through with him, he would be left, out of that half million, about a thousand dollars.

He still maintained his hold on the adolescent audience, but magazines aimed at that market were already asking the poignant question, *Is Bobby Darin Deserting Us?* He had no need to worry: he was filling such adult rooms as the Cloister in Hollywood, the Chez Paree in Chicago—always considered Sinatra and Tony Bennett territory—and the Chase Hotel in St. Louis, where he had just broken the house record set by Martin and Lewis.

"That's another thing I'm interested in," he said, and here you can see why he was thought cocky, "breaking records."

The pressures he was already under were evident in St. Louis. The telephone in his hotel room rang constantly. The switchboard operator screened the calls. If the caller was someone he knew, or someone who seemed to have legitimate business, he would take the call. And he took all his calls himself. Thus far he had managed to do without the flock of sycophants, that curious breed who gravitate to show-business male stars, hoping for favors, including the girls the star in question doesn't happen to want, or accepting, in the cynical term men use, sloppy seconds. Darin ran a tight operation, carrying with him only his drummer and his pianist. In California, he didn't even own a home: he shared digs with his manager. When a caller seemed to have no legitimate purpose, he took a pass: "You never know whether the conversation is being taped," he said.

A lot of his calls, and his mail, attempted to sell him something, as often as not an insurance policy. And of course there were the charities, soliciting a little of his money. He said, "Usually they come on with the assumption that you're a member of a certain religion, or the Masons. But I immediately refer all these requests to Steve Blauner, my manager, who turns down ninety-six percent of them. It's a perfect cop-out for me.

"I don't mind though. I admire con—because that's my business too." It was a surprisingly candid admission.

He did mind, however, the calls from doting mothers promoting daughters "just loaded with talent" and needing only a break, a break the celebrity was expected to provide, to attain stardom. Over the years, I have heard a number of these calls. I particularly remember one to the Brown theater in Louisville to a visiting publicist from the Disney company with whom I was about to have lunch. He held out the phone so I could hear the woman. Her daughter was thirteen, and just loaded with talent of course, and in a seductive voice the woman was suggesting all the wonderful things her daughter might do for the man, whom she had never even seen. It occurred to me that the woman was trying to do nothing less than pimp her daughter. In the years since then it has crossed my mind that tarts have no hesitation about turning their daughters into tarts. Darin had no more taste for such women than I did. He would try to be polite, but discovered quickly that there is nothing as angry as an ambitious mother scorned. "They begin screaming at you," he said, "and tell you you're no good and you're never going to make it big."

Autograph hunters were already a major hazard. Once he decided to spend an hour between shows signing autographs. He set a table in the doorway of his dressing room—a fairly standard technique for celebrities—and sat down behind it. A crowd quickly assembled. When the hour was over, the line still was there, and when he stood up and said he was sorry but he had to do a show. Those at the back of the line screamed that they had been cheated. After that, he devised stratagems for dodging autograph hunters altogether.

Not all of the callers were schoolgirls. One woman who slipped past the switchboard got hot and heavy with him. He held the phone a little away from his ear, and I could hear her: "Come over for dinner. My husband's away for a week . . . ."

The girls were everywhere. They haunted the corridor near his hotel room. How they learn room numbers was (and remains) a mystery to me. They wrote him letters, some of them pretty steamy. Sometimes they would knock timidly at his hotel-room door, sounding like mice in the woodwork, and if he answered they would go into fits of titters, and, after recovering from the traumatic joy at his speaking to them, extend their autographs books.

On the whole, I found Bobby pretty gracious in handling the girls. One afternoon he and I went for a walk in a park. It was just after a snowfall, but the sidewalks had been cleared. A group of girls, carrying their books, obviously just out of school, recognized him. He sat down on a park bench and chatted with them. None of them was what could be called pretty, but he treated them as if they were. There was little giggling, and they got autographs, and thanked him gravely, and went on their way. I liked him for it. I liked him for a lot of things.

But he was perfectly realistic about this phenomenon of feminine flocking, which had happened with Sinatra, Valentino, Liszt, Paganini, hell I would think it happened with athletes in the Greek games. Certainly sports figures had their groupies, although the term hadn't been coined yet: that would come with the rock groups, and the plaster casters.

When Darin came up, the publicists were firm in their argument that sex had nothing to do with it. Elvis, after all, was a nice church-going boy who loved his mother, and Pat Boone was the epitome of moral purity. As far as Darin was concerned, the girls could go right on panting.

"When that stops, I'm in trouble," he said.

"The sex element is the most important in this business. I'm no Don Juan. In fact, I'm very self-conscious about my . . . my physiognomy. But the fact remains, you must sell sex. It must not be conscious, however. You're either sexy or you're not. I don't know whether I am. I will know, fifteen years from now.

"There are two types of sex. There's the kind the female sees when she wants to park her shoes under the entertainer's bed. Sinatra has it. Then there is the kind that makes a *guy* sitting at a table in a club say, 'Man, this guy is a man's man. I know my woman digs him, but he's a man I don't have to worry about because he wouldn't try to beat my time.' The men in the audience can identify with that type of entertainer."

As if to prove his point, three customers night after night at the Chase were a sixteen-year-old girl who was president of the Bobby Darin fan club and her mother and father. The girl, who watched him with an almost religious intensity, said she was "analyzing his style."

The style at that point entailed a number of unreconciled elements: a lot of Sinatra, a little Tony Bennett, a little Bing Crosby, and the influence of the rock-and-roll world from which he was emerging. If he did not have Sinatra's polish, Sinatra was then forty-two, Darin twenty-three. Sinatra had been a professional singer for twenty-one years, Darin had been singing for four. But what struck me during those days was his willingness to learn, and the rapidity with which he could do it. He asked me, believe it or not, what I thought of his show, and being the ever-tactful type that I am, I told him. I said that it lacked control. I said that a performer should hold something of himself in reserve, not throw it all at the audience from the moment of coming on stage. I said he should give himself room and time to build.

To my surprise, the next night he did exactly that. He began in a very subdued manner, and then kept building to a strong peak at the end. "You see?" he said, with a grin, afterwards. "I tried it. You know, I've learned something."

Amazing. And he was wonderful to watch. He had about him something of the best French chansoniers, like Yves Montand and Henri Salvador. I told him that, too, and he was very pleased. He said he wanted to be known as the singer who moved like a dancer, and he had already achieved it: a loose throw-away kind of agility, with little shuffles and side-steps, all of it directly out of vaudeville. He was very, very graceful.

Bobby told me that his father died of pneumonia shortly before his birth in 1936, and his mother struggled to raise him. "We were poor, on-relief type Bronx people," he said. "Besides my mom, who's dead now, there was my sister. She married a wonderful guy who was good to me. Now that I can help out, I do."

When he was in his early thirties, that story unraveled. He had always believed his mother was Polly Cassotto, who had been a showgirl known as Paula Walden, and that his father was her husband, a man named Saverio Cassotto, nicknamed Big Sam Curley, reputed to be a low-level associate of Mafia leader Frank Costello. Cassotto died in prison, and the family went on relief. Nina, the girl he thought was his sister, married a truck driver and refrigerator repairman named Charlie Maffia, who held down two jobs to help the family.

Bobby learned that Nina was his mother and Polly Cassotto, whom he thought was his mother, was actually his grandmother. The revelation was shattering to him, according to associates such as Bobby Scott. "My whole life has been a lie," Bobby said when he learned the truth. It certainly didn't help establish a central sense of identity.

But these revelations lay ten years in the future when I spent that time in St. Louis with him. He told me that when he was fifteen, he had played drums "in a rinky-tink group" in Catskill resorts. One of his colleagues there was a pianist named Dick Behrke, who was now his accompanist and music director, and, he said, his best friend in the world. His drummer was Ronnie Zito. "I never had the kind of adolescence most kids have," Bobby said. "When I went to a dance, it was to play it."

But all sorts of musicians tell tales of this experience. It's one of the reasons many jazz musicians can't dance: they were always playing the gigs, not attending them.

Bobby's ambition was blinding, and he made no gee-whiz ah-shucks attempt to hide it. "I want to be in the Number One slot," he said. "I guess the polls are of primary importance to me. Showing up in the *Down Beat* poll last December was the greatest thing that's happened to me." And he was winning a lot of awards at the time.

"I want the respect of the trade. You must have that. If you can create excitement in both the trade and the public, you've got something.

"These things are the emotional compensation for the work I'm doing. Don't let guys who poo-poo the polls kid you. Anybody that's alive cares whether he's accepted.

"Movies is where I want to go, no question of that. But I want the right roles. We've looked at twenty or twenty-five scripts, and I've turned them all down. I don't want to do an exploitation picture. I want to do drama, light comedy, the whole range. And some day I want an Academy Award. The motion picture business is still the most glamorous, glorious, stimulating, exciting end of the business. Sammy Davis told me that before he did *Anna Lucasta*, he could walk down the street and maybe two people would want his autograph. Now he is constantly sought after. That's why I want the picture business.

"Ambition? That's my middle name."

He said he wanted not only to write songs, but to compose classical music, "music of a serious nature," he said, affecting a lofty English accent to show he was kidding. But he wasn't kidding. I asked him if he knew what sonata form was. "I don't know what sonata form or any other kind of form is," he said, and when he saw that I was trying to keep a straight face, he said sheepishly, "Oh I know it sounds ridiculous. But I want to do it, and I will do it, even if it takes until I'm forty."

It was impossible not to like him.

He wouldn't live to be forty.

In the age of Eminem, the rock world of Bobby Darin, the time of *Splish Splash*, seems long ago and far away, an age of innocence. Recalling his analysis of it, I see that he had no more idea than I did of how dark the American culture would go.

Of rock and roll, he said, "There were really three phases to it. The first came when it made its early, headline-getting impact.

"Then it suffered a setback in 1955. Then came a guy named Presley, who set the market on its feet. It was fantastic. There were all those millions of feet walking into record stores, not only buying Presley records, but whatever else was in the store.

"The next ebb came when Presley went into the service. Then came Dick Clark, to set it up again.

"Presley's only competitor was Pat Boone. And Boone was using rock-and-roll as a device—which is all well and good; it's exactly what I did.

"Presley was an amazing phenomenon. He had the same hypnotic effect that Roosevelt had on the voting public. Now it's time to change. There's no doubt that Presley will have to change, if he wants to survive.

"Things *are* changing. I've noticed the music business runs in cycles of about five or seven years. A new one is due, with or without the payola scandal."

Another payola scandal had just erupted. The Congress fussed a little as it always does, and did nothing, as usual.

"What is the payola scandal going to do?" Bobby said. "Win a few Senatorial seats? They won't stop it. Of course, it depends what we mean by payola. The cash payola will stop. That's an evil, and must be eliminated."

It wasn't; it merely became more surreptitious.

"But they'll never stop somebody from laying a couple of tickets for a Broadway show on somebody visiting New York. That's human nature.

"Rock and roll? I love some of it.

"I love Ray Charles. Ray Charles is the greatest thing since Beethoven.

"There are only three singers who move me emotionally: Peggy Lee, Frank Sinatra, and Ray Charles. If I want to be lullabied, I listen to Peggy Lee, I don't care what the tempo is. That's the boss lady. If I want to think about lost love—or any kind of love, for that matter—I listen to Frank. If I want to be thrown into a primitive, wild kind of emotional involvement, I listen to Ray Charles. I can't think of anything else I want satisfied. These three people are the Rock of Gibraltar.

"Make that four singers I like. I'm a Crosby fan. *I'm an Old Cowhand*? I was listening to that at five. And Sammy Davis has taught me a lot, in terms of how to generate excitement.

"It is Sinatra as a person more than Sinatra as a singer that has influenced me. His outlook on the business and his attitude to performance are the important things.

"My approach to singing is not the same. Sinatra has a clipped speech. I'm a slurrer. But let's face it, he's the boss. Another thing I admire is the fact that he's done all the great tunes.

"I have a theory that his phrasing is accidental."

And I have a theory that Darin was wrong.

"About the time he made *From Here to Eternity*, he abandoned the schooled approach he'd been using, because I think he didn't have the breath. I think it didn't happen musically but physically. Later it became a musical thing. He's more right than anybody has been. And I got news, there aren't very many places to go after him. And while we're on the subject of Sinatra, there's something I'd like to clear up.

"I've been accused of comparing myself to Sinatra, in terms of career climbing. Certain people have said I was out to beat him out. First, I never said this, the press said it. Second, to me, Frank Sinatra is the greatest living lyric interpreter, and that ends the admiration. My idol is the step beyond the great image of today. In other words, it's an indefinite goal.

"He's supposedly mad at me. I've never met the man, but he's supposedly mad at me. He came up with what I think is one of the greatest single lines of all time.

"After all the recent things in the press, somebody asked him, 'What do you think of Bobby Darin?' And Sinatra said, 'I sing in saloons. Bobby Darin does my prom dates.'

"I was so gassed by the line when I saw it. All I can say is that I'm only too happy to play his prom dates."

And there was a pause. "Until graduation."

Bobby Scott, who was at one time, as we have noted, Darin's pianist and music director, also held that position with Dick Haymes for a while. Bobby wrote in the *Jazzletter* in 1984 that even Haymes' ardent fans couldn't forgive him for not being more famous than Sinatra. The bellicose tone of the notes to the Rhino four-CD Darin set suggests a similar phenomenon. Darin never did fulfill his potential. Those notes say that a few years after *Mack the Knife* he "began starring in movies." Excuse me, Darin never starred in an important movie. Even the notes admit that some of his estimated thirteen films, particularly those with his wife Sandra Dee, "were fluff, to be sure."

But could he act? Oh yes. If you run across the 1963 film *Captain Newman MD* with Gregory Peck, note Darin's excellent performance as a very disturbed young corporal. But that was the peak of his film career.

If you listen to his recordings of standards from the time of

Mack the Knife in 1958 through about 1961, you can hear the conscious search for self. In *I Found a New Baby*, recorded in February 1960, you hear what he meant when he said he was a slurrer: it comes out not baby but *bavy*. And his oo's are too round. This very conscious kind of enunciation is a pain in the ass, like, for that matter, some of the more egregious mannerisms of Sinatra.

The arrangements on some of Darin's hits, including *Mack the Knife* and *Beyond the Sea* are by Richard Wess, and they're pretty sad—"limp", as I heard one musician describe them. And there are some peculiar choices of material. Some songs are gender specific: they work only for a man or for a woman. Peggy Lee recorded Jim Webb's *By the Time I Get to Phoenix*. She did it beautifully, but it is strictly a man's song, expressing a kind of sexual guilt particular to men. Darin recorded *Black Coffee*, which is a very much a woman's song. He does it remarkably like Peggy, from whose recording he unquestionably learned it. He even essays, in French, a Piaf tune, *Milord*, and to do it he affects her tough whore-house mannerisms. Again, the performance is a conspicuous imitation. He is floundering in that period. He really doesn't know who he is. His imitations of his sources are obvious. But then, in August of 1960, he recorded a duet album with Johnny Mercer, including a song called *Two of a Kind*, which they co-wrote. It is charming, and some of Darin's affectations seem to drop away. (That album is available on CD.)

A few months later, on March 22, 1961, when he recorded *It's You or No One*, his sense of identity seems stronger. The fact that the chart is by Torrie Zito—Ronnie's brother, and later Tony Bennett's music director—may have helped. Thus too *How About You*, recorded the day before. The first chorus is delightful; in a second chorus, Darin introduces some aberrant lyrics, presumably his own, and they're kinda dumb. But he sings them well.

Darin had been recording for Atco. He moved to Capitol, and the company assigned Billy May to him for a time. The charts are, as one might expect, marvelous, even on a so-so tune Darin wrote, *As Long as I'm Singing*. But on *Oh Look at Me Now*, *A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square*, and *The Party's Over*, you hear what I have come to perceive as the real Bobby Darin. It's out of Sinatra, to be sure (and which among us can plead not-guilty to that?) but it's his own now. It's internalized, it's unconscious. He sings beautifully in tune, the affectations are gone, and I am forced to the speculation that the encounter with my friend John H. Mercer had a lasting beneficial effect. By the time of the recordings with Billy May, he has evolved into a really marvelous singer, both in up-tempo bouncing numbers and in the ballad *The Party's Over*. His performance is the most exquisite reading of this song I can recall. And there are some lovely performances in a "live" album he did at the Flamingo in Las Vegas, including *My Funny Valentine* and a superb little-known song by Sol Weinstein called *The Curtain Falls* which he used as a show-closer. He had mostly secondary parts in films, and there is no entry about him in Leonard Maltin's valuable *Movie Encyclopedia*, except briefly in the fairly substantial item on Sandra Dee.

Darin reverts to some dumb songs with charts by Richard Wess, such as *Hello Dolly* and *Mame*, a pair of turkeys by Jerry Herman that Darin distinguishes with superior performance. But he is at his best with good arrangers and tunes, including *The Shadow of Your Smile* (great tune, dumb lyric, which Johnny Mercer hated; he said it sounded like it was about a girl with a mustache) and *Don't Rain on My Parade*, both with charts by Shorty Rogers, recorded in 1966. Bobby's last album for Capitol was *Venice Blue*. The title song was mine, more precisely one of the adaptations of Charles Aznavour songs that I wrote for Charles' Broadway one-man show of that period. I don't care for the song, I don't like my lyric for it, and I didn't like Darin's performance, which I barely remember; I don't have the album.

Back on the Atco label, Darin talked the company into letting him record a project dear to his heart, the Leslie Bricusse score for the film *Dr. Doolittle*. By this time Roger Kellaway was his pianist and arranger. Darin was still striving, still aspiring to better things, and that album is marvelous, as I mentioned in these pages a couple of years ago. Atco was not enthusiastic about the project, and his producer there, Arif Mardin, advised him not to do it. The company wanted the profitable Bobby Darin of *Splish Splash* and *Queen of the Hop* and *Mack the Knife*. The film's producer, Arthur C. Jacobs, apparently didn't think Darin could do the *Doolittle* music justice. Atlantic indulged Bobby to the extent of letting him do it. The album was recorded in July 1967 at Western Recorders in Los Angeles and released almost in secret. Bobby got the shaft and Sammy Davis got the hit on *Talk to the Animals*. In other words, Atco screwed Bobby. Into the ground. Roger Kellaway tried for years to get the album re-released, and finally succeeded. It came out on on a small label called Diabolo in 1998.

And thus it was that I never heard the album until its release on CD. Assuming you take my word on its merits, probably the only way you can get it is to order it—if you have one of those record stores that will do that for you. Roger gave me a copy. I put it on the stereo, and was blown away, both by Roger's charts and by Darin.

"I learned everything I know about stage timing from Bobby and from Jack E. Leonard," Roger said.

"Bobby never wanted me to feel down when he was feeling

down. He said, 'When I'm down, I need you to be up. Don't go to my emotional places when I'm down. Whenever I turn around I want you to be looking at me.' And I said, 'How can I conduct the orchestra and look at you at the same time?" He said, 'That's your problem.'

" I liked him."

Then Darin lost his way again. He embarked on a period of folk and country songs, some of which are on the fourth of the Rhino CDs. His marriage with Sandra Dee ended. He grew a mustache. He recorded songs by Hank Williams and Bob Dylan. He wrote some songs in the country idiom, including some social protest material. He even changed his name again, this time to Bob Darin. I think these records are awful. His strange country accent is as affected as the early slurs, words like *bavy*. If I want to hear Hank Williams material, I'll listen to Hank Williams doing it, not some boy from the Bronx — and better yet, I'll listen to Mickey Newbury songs. Bobby's admirers see this expanse into yet another area as proof of his versatility; I see it as indicative of his need for popularity and uncertainty about who he was.

Arranger and composer Eddie Karam went to work for him in 1972, as music director of a summer replacement for the Dean Martin TV show. "For me it was like heaven," Eddie said. "He gave me the best contract I ever saw. My attorney told me to sign it without reading it. The network extended the contract for thirteen more shows, starting in January 1973. The first two of them, I was in ecstasy. Then Bobby's doctor told him to go home and put his papers in order. The third show was a completely different atmosphere. He came in and attacked everybody.

"I was very saddened by what happened to Bobby."

Oricchio says in the liner notes, "His early death may have robbed him of his rightful place among the pantheon of pop music's top performers." He's right. Bobby never got to write his "serious" music. For that matter, he never got to be forty. He died on December 20, 1973. He was thirty-seven.

Late in his life Bobby made an album called *Bobby Darin: Born Walden Robert Cassotto*. It was as if he sought suddenly to find his way home to the Bronx and his Italian heritage.

Having been taken in, during that time with him in St. Louis, by his cockiness, I long thought that Bobby was one New York Italian who had escaped the Picasso Syndrome. Apparently I was wrong. He once told his manager, "Steve, when I get up in the morning, you know what I see? I see a short, ugly, double-chinned, paunchy, balding guy. But when I got out that door I'm fucking Clark Gable. Nobody knows how I feel."

Clark Gable indeed. It was all an act, then.

Even Sinatra apparently never fully escaped the Picasso Syndrome. Sinatra said that often when he was in a social situation, and saw that someone was observing him, he knew what the man was thinking: Wop. Wrong. The man was thinking, "My God, that's Frank Sinatra!"

For all his pretense of assurance, it seems to me that Bobby Darin never *really* knew how good he was. And thinking about him sort of breaks my heart.

Age

by Steve Allen

Age does not come in strictly metered increments.
It comes in waves.
Some Thursdays we are younger than on Monday of that week.
Faster, stronger, witty, more romantic.
But there are days when age comes crashing in upon our rocks,
And others, too, on which it rises like a tide,
Eroding our perceptions and desires,
Fogging, like the morning seas at Malibu,
Our memory of those events most recent.

We yet recover
As separate natural tides within us flow.
We measure age, for easiness of speech, by clocks and calendars.
But that is not the way in fact it comes,
And finally, with something very like patience,
It wins, and washes us away.

If I Died

I would not care much if I died except
That there are poems I shall not have time to read
And rivers I shall not have time to bathe in,
That there are stars beyond my power of sight,
Lost seas I shall never sail,
Lips never kissed,
And morning chimes in sunny cities I shall not awake in.

This is the only reason to fear death,
That far too much of life is left unlived,
That certain symphonies will go unheard,
Some mountain snows will melt before one sees them.

Whatever's left when I decay
Will be, I promise you, a mighty bursting wild desire.

— From *A Flash of Swallows*, 1969