"King" Cole, Tommy Dorsey, and Jackie Gleason hosted their own weekly variety shows.

RISE OF THE BIG SINGERS

By 1946 the main focus of popular attention had shifted away from celebrity instrumentalist/bandleaders such as Benny Goodman, Count Basie, and Glenn Miller, toward a new generation of crooners. Many of the top singers of the late 1940s and early 1950s—including Frank Sinatra, Perry Como, Nat "King" Cole, Frankie Laine, Peggy Lee, and Rosemary Clooney—had started their careers during the swing era. In the early 1950s these pop stars had been joined by a younger generation of vocalists, who specialized in sentimental ballads, novelty numbers—cheerful, disposable songs that often resembled advertising jingles—and crooner-style cover versions of country and western and rhythm & blues hits. These vocalists were promoted to the expanding teenage audience.

The musicians' union recording ban of 1942–44—which had banned instrumentalists from recording but did not apply to even the most musically gifted vocalists—encouraged a number of big band singers to begin recording under their own names, sometimes with choral accompaniment. Those singers with the most entrepreneurial savvy, or the best business agents, were able to parlay this opportunity into long-lasting success. In addition, the music industry's mastery of cross-media promotion—on radio, films, and television—reached new heights. Following in the footsteps of Bing Crosby, many of the biggest singing stars of the postwar era also became film stars (for example, Frank Sinatra and Doris Day) or hosted their own television shows (Perry Como and Nat "King" Cole).

Frank (Francis Albert) Sinatra (1915–98) was one of the first big-band singers to take advantage of changes in the music business. Born into a working-class Italian family in Hoboken, New Jersey, Sinatra attracted public attention in 1935 when he appeared as a member of a vocal quartet on a popular radio show called *Major Bowes' Amateur Hour*. From 1937 to 1939 he worked as a singing waiter at the Rustic Cabin, a nightclub in New Jersey. (Although the job paid little, Sinatra wisely kept it because the place was wired for radio broadcasts.) In 1939 the bandleader Harry James hired him, and later that same year he joined the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra.

In 1942 Sinatra convinced the Victor Company to let him make a solo recording—against Tommy Dorsey's wishes—and soon thereafter bought out his contract with the Dorsey band. A series of appearances on the national radio show *Your Hit Parade* helped him build a national following, particularly among younger listeners. During the AFM strike Sinatra continued to work in the studio, performing with choral accompaniment on several hit records. The magnitude of Sinatra's celebrity became clear for the first time in December 1942, when he appeared at the Paramount Theater in New York City with the Benny Goodman Orchestra. Goodman, introducing Sinatra, suddenly found himself confronted with thousands of screaming young women. (The startled bandleader—himself no stranger to celebrity—is reported to have blurted out, "What the f— is *that?*")

Promoted on radio, at the movies, and in the press (including biographical comic books aimed at high school–age females), Sinatra's popularity soared, culminating

Waiting for Frankie outside, and celebrating his presence inside. Frank Driggs Collection.

in the first documented example of modern pop hysteria, the so-called Columbus Day Riot of 1944. The occasion was a return engagement at the Paramount Theater by Sinatra and the Goodman band, and thirty thousand fans—including thousands of teenage girls, called "bobby soxers"—showed up to claim tickets. The Paramount could seat only thirty-six hundred people, and many fans refused to leave after the first show, triggering a riot among fans lined up outside the theater. In a sense, Sinatra was the direct predecessor of the teen idols of the rock 'n' roll era, and of the Beatles after them. Falling into a "Sinatrance," young women cried, screamed, and tore their hair. They followed the singer everywhere, fighting for pieces of his clothing and treating his used cigarette butts as sacred objects. The press and public bestowed nicknames on Sinatra: he was *Swoonatra*, *The Sultan of Swoon*, or, simply, *The Voice*.

Oddly handsome, with a triangular head, golf-ball Adam's apple, and jug-handle ears, Sinatra projected a combination of confidence and vulnerability. Asked to explain his early popularity, Sinatra later conjectured that he represented to those at home all the local boys that were gone, drafted into the war. It is also undeniable that Frank Sinatra's early success lay partly in his keen business sense, his access to media exposure, and his sheer stamina. (In 1946 he did as many as forty-five shows a week, singing eighty to one hundred songs a day!) And he was also a highly skilled singer and talented interpreter of popular songs, respected by the musicians with whom he worked.

Sinatra's approach to singing took shape in response to his early hero, Bing Crosby. In a 1965 article Sinatra wrote:

> When I started singing in the mid-1930s everybody was trying to copy the Crosby style—the casual kind of raspy sound in the throat. Bing was on top, and a bunch of us . . . were trying to break in. It occurred to me that maybe the world didn't need another Crosby. I decided to experiment a little and come up with something dif-

ferent. What I finally hit on was more the bel canto Italian school of singing.[1] . . . That meant I had to stay in better shape because I had to sing more. It was more difficult than Crosby's style, much more difficult. (Pleasants 1974, p. 189)

Sinatra's combination of Crosby's crooning style with the bel canto technique of Italian opera was further enriched by other influences. In addition to female jazz and cabaret singers such as Billie Holiday and Mabel Mercer, Sinatra talked about the influence of instrumental soloists on his vocal approach:

> The thing that influenced me the most was the way that Tommy [Dorsey] played his trombone. He would take a musical phrase and play it all the way through without breathing, for eight, ten, maybe sixteen bars. How in the hell did he do it? Why couldn't a singer do that, too? Fascinated, I began to listen to other soloists. I bought every Jascha Heifetz record I could find, and listened to him play the violin hour after hour. His constant bowing, where you never heard a break, carried the melody line straight on through, just like Dorsey's trombone. It was my idea to make my voice work in the same way as a trombone or violin—not sounding like them, but "playing" the voice like those instruments. (Pleasants 1974, p. 192)

In performance, these various stylistic influences combined with Sinatra's mastery of the microphone, which he regarded as an extension of his vocal instrument. While Bing and other early crooners seemed to be *overheard* by the microphone, Sinatra and others of his generation *played* it, subtly shifting it to achieve certain tone qualities, accentuate melodic passages or lyric phrases, and avoid the "popping" of consonants. Perhaps it was this approach to his craft—that of an instrumental musician—that helped him avoid the lachrymose sentimentality of many crooners of the postwar era. Although Sinatra's popularity took a nosedive in the early 1950s—largely as a result of well-publicized difficulties in his personal life—his success in later years (see Chapter 8) was in no small part due to the connection his audience perceived between his voice and his personality, each involving a delicate balance between emotionalism and rationality, deep feeling and technical control.

Orchestral tag	8 measures *(tempo rubato)* Music closely related to the introduction

While few postwar crooners were able to match Frank Sinatra's artistry or longevity, this does not mean that there was no serious competition. Despite the very small number of African American artists on the pop music charts of the early 1950s, it could be argued that the greatest postwar crooner—in both musical and commercial terms—was a black musician, Nat "King" Cole (1917–65). Nathaniel Coles was born in Montgomery, Alabama, and his family moved to the South Side of Chicago when he was only four years old. His father was pastor of a Baptist church, and young Nat was playing organ and singing in the choir by the age of

twelve. He made his first recording in 1936, in the Solid Swingers, a jazz band led by his brother Eddie Cole. Nat Cole, a brilliant piano improviser, exerted a strong influence on later jazz pianists such as Oscar Peterson and Bill Evans. He moved from Chicago to Los Angeles in 1937 and formed his own group, the King Cole Trio. (This is the group we heard at the end of Chapter 4, performing George Gershwin's "Embraceable You.")

Nat "King" Cole was by far the most successful black recording artist of the postwar era, placing a total of fourteen recordings in the Top 10 pop charts between 1946 and 1954. Along with the Mills Brothers and Louis Jordan, Cole was one of the first African American musicians to cross over regularly to the predominantly white pop charts. Although he continued to record a range of material—including jazz performances with the King Cole Trio—Cole's biggest commercial successes were sentimental ballads, accompanied by elaborate orchestral arrangements: "(I Love You) For Sentimental Reasons" (1946); "Nature Boy" (1948); "Unforgettable" (1950); his biggest hit, "Mona Lisa" (1950), which sold over five million copies; and "Too Young" (1951), perhaps the first teenage love ballad.

Nat "King" Cole performs in a nightclub, 1954. Courtesy Library of Congress.

Given the racial prejudice prevalent in the American music industry, and in society as a whole, Nat "King" Cole's professional success was truly remarkable, comparable to the baseball career of Jackie Robinson, who became the first black player in the major leagues in 1947. Promoted by Capitol Records as a "sepia Sinatra," Cole was the first black musician to host his own weekly radio series (1948–49) and the first to have a network television show (1956–57). He recorded hundreds of songs for Capitol Records, helping to keep the new Los Angeles–based company afloat during its early years. Nat "King" Cole entered a field dominated exclusively by white artists and bested all but the most popular of them in both artistic and commercial terms. And unlike many pop crooners of the time, Cole thought of himself first and foremost as a musician, a musician who sang because his public wanted him to sing. In response to jazz critics who lambasted him for his success as a pop crooner, Cole noted that critics weren't the ones who bought records: "They get 'em free."