

Louis Prima. Even On Film He Makes 'Em Swoon

Eleonora Mazzucchi (April 20, 2008)



Louis Prima was one of the greatest musical talents of his time, with a career that took off at the height of the 1930's jazz era and that lasted well into 60's and 70's. He was a man who exerted considerable charm, both over audiences and the many women he famously romanced. A documentary, "The Wildest", celebrates his life and gets a screening at the CUNY Graduate Center of Journalism.

Louis Prima: ladies' man, jazz legend, creator of some of the most infectively danceable and engaging music ever made. The latter was evidenced just last week by the expectant murmurs that



turned to soft rhythmic tapping, and then to distinct by-the-beat knee drumming, from an audience who couldn't help themselves when "The Wildest" (1999), a documentary on Prima by Don McGlynn, opened with one of his catchy musical numbers. Prima and Keely Smith, his doll-faced singing partner, appeared on screen delivering a jazzy swing tune. It was a performance so full of Prima's characteristic verve that it must have taken the strength of God for those audience members not to jump out of their seats and sing along to the refrain, "I Ain't Got Nobody". Maybe it was the black-and-white 1950's-era ambiance, the big band with an energetic brass section or—most likely—as one of the documentary's interviewees put it, Louis' "playing for the people", his drive to entertain listeners, "make them smile and laugh" above all else.

Prima was a New Orleans-born Italian American, reared on music from an early age. "The Wildest" emphasized that it was in the New Orleanian soul to love music and that the whole of the city thrived on it, made its living off of it, particularly in the 1920s jazz age in which Prima lived. As a boy he played the violin and constantly peered into black gospel churches whose musicality, and probably musical physicality, he drew on for inspiration. It wouldn't take him long to pick up the trumpet and then strike out on his own, stealing the stage with singing and instrumental styles that seemed to separate him from other performers—even though, listening to his gravelly voice, one can hear traces of another great Louis from New Orleans: the unforgettable Armstrong. Indeed, when Prima was trying to secure one of his first gigs in New York the timber of his voice and his southern Italian swarthy militated against him, leading some club owners to believe he was black, or at very least, too close to black for comfort.



But that same southern Italian element would turn to his advantage—and not just to win the hearts of sex symbols like Jean Harlow. Many commentators in the documentary, including radio host Ron Cannatella and jazz-pop authority Will Friedwald, agree that Prima's background set him apart musically and the results are best observed in pieces like the much-adored "Angelina" (1944) and the humorous, anecdotal "Please No Squeeza da Banana" (1945). Prima would also use, to comic effect, a gibberish Italian dialect in the middle of his songs. It was part of an onstage game he played with his most famous female collaborator, Keely Smith (there would be many female costars over the years, and more often than not, they also became Prima's wives). Prima, a wild crazy kid on stage, spouted the mangled old-world Italian phrases while Smith, a poised girl with a pixie haircut and a dead-pan stare, tried to repeat them for laughs. Louis Prima's Italian identity was the twist he brought to jazz-pop in the 1940's and 50's and possibly, along with his eager-to-please repertory, what has prevented him from being fully considered a jazzman by jazz wonks. In the estimation of many historians his music wasn't pure enough, and his style too much that of a showman. But if being the consummate showman produces timeless hits like "Sing, Sing, Sing" (1936) and puts Louis Prima in the ranks with Frank Sinatra—with just as much or more charisma than Old Frankie had—being impure may not matter so much after all.



At the CUNY Graduate Center of Journalism, in a program presented by Joe Sciorra and the Calandra Institute, the screening of “The Wildest” ended on a high note. The lights came on and it became obvious that the audience that filled the room, apart from some young folks brought in by their parents and grandparents, was for the most part, straight out of Prima’s generation. And when it came to interacting with “Wildest” producer Joe Lauro, who sat in for a post-screening Q and A with Prof. Anthony Tamburri, it was clear that Prima’s legacy as a seducer of the female masses was intact. A white haired woman took the opportunity to exclaim: “We used to go see Louis all the time at the Hotel Comodore without our parents knowing it. We even had a Louis Prima fan club!” “You know,” she added defensively, scoldingly, like a woman whose lover has been defamed, “we considered him a very serious musician.”

(Multimedia selected and edited by Giovanna Landolfi)

Related Links: <http://www.jazzitalia.net/articoli/louisprima.asp> [2]
<http://www.louisprima.com/> [3]

Source URL: <http://ftp.iitaly.org/magazine/focus/art-culture/article/louis-prima-even-film-he-makes-em-swoon>

Links

[1] <http://ftp.iitaly.org/files/prima1208832058jpg>

[2] <http://www.jazzitalia.net/articoli/louisprima.asp>

[3] <http://www.louisprima.com/>