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Whiteness and Sex in the Music of Rosemary Clooney

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Most discussion of popular music after World War II invokes a comparison between the era's mainstream popular music and that which had just been re-christened rhythm & blues, with the former invoked as a dry, sterile music for adults and the latter as a sexualized frenzy. The popular documentary series *The History of Rock and Roll*, produced by Time-Life in 1995 and still frequently broadcast on PBS, makes the argument with the mere juxtaposition of two images: Patti Page serenely singing her hit "Doggie in the Window" to a cocker spaniel, and Little Richard sweatily pounding away on his piano. More analytically, David Brackett once compared the "pedestrian, four-square rhythms" of, again, Patti Page to the "irresistible, syncopated groove" of Ruth Brown. "Which one," he asks, "would *you* rather dance to?"¹



Rosemary Clooney
Courtesy of Michael Ochs Archives

In popular music, who gets to be sexy, and who does not? Or more specifically, which performers are allowed to not just be attractive, but to inhabit personæ that hint at an embodied sexual explicitness just within reach of her audience? Clearly race is the crucial element in the examples above, and in the usual literature on post-war popular music it has become an essential assumption that "white" music was non-sexual, and "black" music the opposite. Furthermore, certainly one is cool, and one is not. Both Time-Life and Brackett's off-the-cuff remark meld together judgments on race, sex, and coolness. Given the somewhat debatable nature of those judgments—what's so wrong with dancing to a slow country waltz?—it is worth asking what conditions made such judgments so normative they barely need to be spoken.

The sexualization of black performers is the subject of a great deal of literature both scholarly and popular, and so it seems useful tackle the question from the other side. It can be fairly obvious how a performer—and his or her management—play up the sexualized aspect of a persona. Thus conversely, how does one de-sexualize a persona? How does one erase the sweat from a singer's brow, tame the

impulse to sway with the music, enforce such serenity under the glare of studio lights? This is, of course, a story of the performance of whiteness and its conflicted relationship with sex.

Specifically, this is a story of the whiteness of women. As our modern music industry slowly coalesced in the wake of World War II, just before the rise of rock and roll in 1955, there was an interesting phenomenon. Already the preceding decade had seen the transformation of the great dance bands into the smaller, more commercially viable acts oriented around singers such as Frank Sinatra. In this first wave, a few women made

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a name for themselves: Jo Stafford and Dinah Shore can both be found on the Top 10 list of bestselling artists in 1947. By 1954, however, there were four women on that same list, and a number of others just below. In the historiography of rock and roll that needs its reactionary opposite, it isn't Eddie Fisher or Perry Como who fills that role—or the equally tame R&B vocal groups also lurking on the charts—but these so-called girl singers: Patti Page, Doris Day, and Rosemary Clooney. At a moment when whiteness itself was undergoing both expansion and transformation, these women bore the burden of that new whiteness while also negotiating the post-war domestic turn. The results were anything but pedestrian, and highly revealing of the racial logic of sex and performance.

While all of these singers deserve more scholarly treatment than they have yet received, a brief example of one such career can be a starting point to a few important observations. Raised in Kentucky by her Irish grandparents after her parents divorced, Rosemary Clooney followed a well-trodden path into musical stardom: early success singing jingles for a local radio station, in her case the same station—WLW in Cincinnati—that had launched Doris Day (*née* Kapellhoff) a few years earlier. In 1945 this led to a touring engagement with the Tony Pastor Band, as one of the Clooney Sisters. By the time the Pastor Orchestra arrived in New York City in 1948, Rosemary had matured enough to continue on her own and signed with Columbia Records under the management of legendary impresario Mitch Miller.

Rosemary had her first hit in January in 1951 with “Beautiful Brown Eyes,” which sold a respectable 400,000 copies. Her greatest success, however, came in July of that same year, when she recorded “Come on-a My House,” under the direction of Miller. Famously, Rosemary had wanted none of it, envisioning a career of more genteel love songs instead of this “weird novelty fluff,” as she called it. The song was based upon an Armenian folk song, and had been penned a decade earlier by two recent Armenian immigrants: William Saroyan, the playwright and author of *The Human Comedy* who famously refused a Pulitzer Prize because it was too tainted with commerce, and his cousin Ross Bagdasarian, even more famous for creating, under the name David Seville, Alvin and the Chipmunks.

Mitch Miller was a great fan of the novelty song, and he rightly predicted that Rosemary's exuberant personality could handle the most outlandish of songs and of arrangements, in this case for jazz harpsichord. A harpsichord was borrowed from Juilliard and the pianist Stan Freeman was drafted to play it despite no prior experience. The resulting song was an overwhelming success, staying at number one on the pop charts for eight weeks. The lyrics are a surrealistic mixture of fairy tale and sexual innuendo:

Come on-a my house my house, I'm gonna give you candy
Come on-a my house, my house, I'm gonna give a-you
Apple-a plum and a apricot-a too eh
Come on-a my house, my house-a come on
Come on-a my house, my house-a come on
Come on-a my house, my house I'm gonna give a you
Figs and dates and grapes and cakes eh!

Bagdasarian and Saroyan's song, composed for their unsuccessful off-Broadway musical *The Son*, is actually written from the point of view of a “lonely immigrant boy.” In a slow introduction left out by Clooney and Miller, the boy is going home from work when he spies a “fine U.S. number-one girlie” and falls in love with her. Unsure how to approach her, he speaks to her “in old-country way,” which leads into the chorus of “Come on-a my house.” In the original version, the song ends with the boy singing “Come on-a my house-a, all-a your life, come on, come on and-a be my wife.”

Armenian folk tale or not, the image evoked in Miller's version of the song is a sirenic Hansel and Gretel, with Clooney cast as a particularly seductive witch luring the listener into her food-laden house. Whereas the

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original Armenian boy asked the listener to be his wife, Clooney ends the song by promising us in a throaty voice that if we come into her house, she'll give us "everything." She chants this word three times, before ending on a coquettish exclamation of "Come on-a my house!" Although other versions of this song recorded by artists from Della Reese (1952) to Madonna (2002) have emphasized the seductive, as crooned by Clooney over the clattering plectra, "Come on-a My House" is equal parts sexuality and menace, even implying that the two might be one and the same.

Seductiveness was quite easy to achieve thanks to Clooney's personal charms, but analyzing this atmosphere of menace is more involved. Consider, for instance, the complete lack of contrasting material. Most pop songs of this period followed traditional Tin Pan Alley structures, especially the classic thirty-two bar AABA or ABAB verse-chorus arrangements. The only other hit song of 1951 to lack a strongly contrasting B section was a traditional number from a completely different time, the Weavers' strophic folk song "On Top of Old Smoky." With the slow intro stripped out of "Come on-a My House," the only break from Clooney's voice is provided by the harpsichord solo, which riffs on the same material. The reverberations of the echo chamber used in the recording further destabilize the listener, adding ambience but also emphasizing the already slippery cross rhythms of the vocal line. When the harpsichord solo comes, it feels as if the machine is beginning to break down. Closely miked and clumsily played, Freeman's harpsichord break sounds on the edge of breakdown. As he attempts faster and faster figuration, melodic content fades into the sound of overworked plectra clacking away.

The putatively Armenian dialect of "Come on-a My House" was heard by most contemporary listeners as Italian, an impression assisted by Clooney's later hits such as "Botch-A-Me (Ba-ba-baciami Piccina)," a cover of an Italian pop song that spent seventeen weeks on the charts in 1952, and "Mambo Italiano," which charted for twelve weeks in 1954. Given her ambiguous last name, many listeners assumed that Clooney was herself Italian. In addition, her (two) marriages to Puerto Rican actor José Ferrer added a *frisson* of ethnicity to Clooney's popular image. Her first major movie role was in *The Stars Are Singing* (1953), a musical farce that lightly thematized the confusions of ethnic assimilation in the wake of the McCarran-Walter Immigration Act of 1952: the protagonist is teenaged Polish immigrant Katri Walenski (played, in true Hollywood melting-pot fashion, by Italian actress Anna Maria Alberghetti) living illegally in the United States while trying to break into show business. She lives in a Greenwich Village tenement full of other Broadway hopefuls, including Clooney, who plays herself as Irish-American pop singer "Terry Brennan," even singing a version of "Come on-a My House." Walenski eventually wins a televised amateur contest singing under the assumed name "Mamie Jones." In the process, however, she is revealed as an illegal alien and is arrested along with most of her friends—with the exception of Clooney, whose blonde good looks keeps her out of trouble. None other than President Eisenhower saves the day, moved by public outcry to grant Walenski a last-minute residency permit.

This was indeed the state of whiteness in the 1950s, as the "melting pot" metaphor seemed, at least to some ethnic communities, to be a reality. The McCarran-Walter Immigration Act established a system in which each European country was given an annual quota of immigrants equal to one-sixth of one percent of citizens in the United States whose ancestry derived from that country, based on the 1920 census. More immediately, however, the mass migration of many Americans into middle-class suburbs effectively destroyed the institutions of cultural cohesion that had long allowed immigrants in urban areas to retain a sense of identity. It was a moment the historian Richard Alba has called "the twilight of ethnicity."² The moment was short-lived, to be sure, and by the early 1960s critics such as Daniel P. Moynihan began to speak of the "unmeltable ethnics."³ But in the 1950s, ethnicity—at least for some descendants of European immigrants—seemed determined to fade.

A generation earlier, Clooney's persona would have found a comfortable niche in a venerable ethnic novelty song tradition. An Irish performer singing an Armenian song in an Italian accent bears an obvious debt to earlier performers like Blanche Ring and Sophie Tucker, who in 1928 could famously sing a line like "My mother is Jewish/my father is Irish/Which proves that I'm Spanish." The ethnic novelty song, however, went into steep

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decline after World War II, when the surge in assimilation made it difficult to find a market for unmeltably ethnic music. Josh Kun has written movingly about this process in his book *Audiotopia*.⁴ Although Jewish comedians like Milton Berle and George Burns were tremendously popular in the early days of television, Kun points out that overt performance of Jewishness died out almost overnight. Kun memorializes singer and clarinetist Mickey Katz, who made his living with Yiddish parody versions of pop songs—he did one of “Come on-a My House”—and live performances that often featured klezmer hoedowns midway through a song. Katz’s insistence on remaining unassimilated resulted in widespread rejection by the Jewish community in the 1950s.

How then, did Clooney succeed with these “outdated” ethnic novelty songs? Simply by virtue of her distance from them. Unlike the “too-Jewish” Katz, blonde, blue-eyed Rosemary Clooney performed ethnicity from an ironic distance. Raised poor in a southern Midwestern town, her career goal was to become an urbane performer of jazz standards, a goal reached when her sentimental version of “Hey There” hit number one in 1954. Even as audiences appreciated the zany antics of “Come on-a My House” and the other novelty songs, they understood that her music was simply playing with signifiers of ethnicity, not actually inhabiting them—that she was really just white. This is made clear on the very first episode of *The Rosemary Clooney Show*, which premiered in 1955. The musical number of this show was a montage of “Come on-a My House” with “Mambo Italiano” and a version of the old Rat Pack standard “Love and Marriage.” Exoticisms abound, with Clooney wearing a garish striped dress and pointing seductively at baskets of fruit. However, the baskets of fruit and other elements of the Italianesque set are not naturalistically presented; they are large cartoon mock-ups, obviously empty underneath. Clooney’s 1950s pop career shows that not only was white ethnicity made invisible, it had become so thoroughly detached from corporeal reality that it could become nothing more than a harmless play of signifiers.

There was one lingering after-effect of this playfully performative ethnicity, however, and it allowed Clooney to distinguish herself from the even whiter Patti Page and Doris Day. Unlike her peers, Clooney utilized a slightly more sexually explicit persona. For Page and Day, their sexuality had to be spoken silently by their bodies; their music hardly broached the subject. Clooney, as in the songs just discussed, was able to at least wield an occasional double-entendre in a winking fashion. It might be useful to think her particular kind of sexualization in the context of Anne Helen Petersen’s recent *Buzzfeed* essay on the Hollywood “Cool Girl.”⁵ Taking Jennifer Lawrence as her starting point, Petersen theorizes a star type that is at once “one of the guys” while remaining both sexually appealing and, crucially, figured as sexually available. Her genealogy stretches back from Lawrence to Jane Fonda, to Carole Lombard, to Clara Bow. It’s important to note that Petersen’s timeline actually skips the 1950s. While surely not intended to be comprehensive, it’s not a coincidence. The “Cool Girl” is distinctly not possible in the immediate post-war aesthetic, at least not for white performers.

Clooney, however, comes close, and it was precisely her ethnic play that allowed her to do so. Page would be forever linked to her slow country-waltzes, of which Brackett’s “pedestrian” epithet is not a fair description, but they do determinedly resist any kind of sexualization. And Day would famously embark upon a series of film roles that would transform the star into one of the most famously virginal personae in popular culture. The de-sexualization of those two stars’ careers needs more attention than this short essay can provide, but suffice it to say, perhaps they represent a kind of aspirational whiteness impossible to separate from the immediate post-war domestic turn. Clooney’s career in the 1950s, on the other hand, despite its winking parody of the old ethnic novelty song, still retained just enough of that racialized difference to allow for a small window of performed sexuality. One needs only recall Miley Cyrus’s recent adventures to see how this technique still resonates with many white performers today, but its rarity and occasional incomprehensibility in the 1950s is a testament to the power of whiteness in that influential period, especially when it came to sex.

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Notes

¹ Brackett, David. "Review of Race, Rock, and Elvis, by Michael T. Bertrand." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 57, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 215–21.

² Alba, Richard D. *Italian Americans: Into the Twilight of Ethnicity*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1984.

³ Novak, Michael. *Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics: Politics and Culture in American Life*. New York: Macmillan, 1972.

⁴ Kun, Josh. *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

⁵ Petersen, Anne Helen. "Jennifer Lawrence and the History of Cool Girls." *BuzzFeed*, February 28, 2014. <http://www.buzzfeed.com/annehelenpetersen/jennifer-lawrence-and-the-history-of-cool-girls>.