

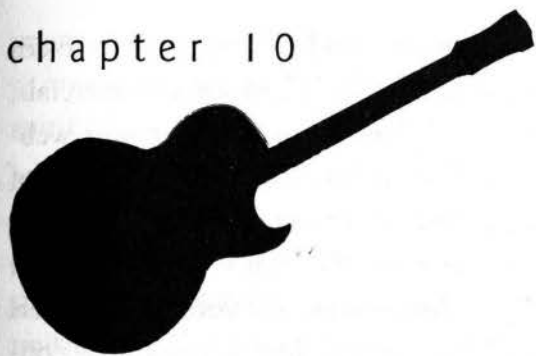
1-1-2005

Taming the Wildest: What We've Made of Louis Prima

John J. Pauly

Marquette University, john.pauly@marquette.edu

Published version. "Taming the Wildest: What We've Made of Louis Prima," in *Afterlife as Afterimage: Understanding Posthumous Fame*. Eds. Steve Jones and Joli Jensen. New York: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, 2005: 191-208. [Publisher Link](#). © 2005 Peter Lang International Academic Publishers. Used with permission.



Taming the Wildest

What We've Made of Louis Prima

JOHN J. PAULY

For over forty years, Louis Prima had survived one change after another in the popular music business. He was, in succession, a trumpet section player in his hometown of New Orleans, the front man for a popular New York City jazz quintet, and the leader of a touring big band. In the 1950s, with his career flagging, he reinvented himself as a spectacular Las Vegas lounge act, then nudged his career through the 1960s with help from his old friend, Walt Disney. He explored many forms of popular music along the way, but aspired only, in his own words, to “play pretty for the people.” The same man who wrote the jazz classic “Sing, Sing, Sing,” would also record easy listening instrumental music, Disney movie soundtracks, and Italian-American novelty songs. In all these reincarnations, he performed with an exuberance that inspired his Vegas nickname, “the wildest.” Prima’s career would end in deafening silence, however. He spent the last thirty-five months of his life in a coma, following a 1975 operation in which doctors partially removed a benign tumor from his brain stem. The inscription on his crypt in Metairie Cemetery outside New Orleans left his fans with one last, familiar lyric—“When the end comes, I know, they’ll say ‘Just a gigolo,’ as life goes on without me.”

Not quite, as it turns out. Twenty-five years after his death, Prima is with us still, an inescapable virtual presence. He lingers on, as a familiar voice on movie soundtracks and television commercials, an avatar of the swing music revival, and an icon of masculine excess. I want to interpret Prima’s resurrection (his latest, real-

ly) as an example of the afterlife that now awaits many dead performers. His traces are everywhere—in reissued recordings, movie soundtracks, television commercials, documentaries, styles of dance and dress, homages and imitators, legal disputes, websites, and revived careers for former colleagues. The technology and economics of digital recording have done much to power his revival. Prima's music never quite went out of circulation, and through the 1980s and '90s many older fans still remembered his Vegas, club, and television performances. As younger listeners began to discover his music, too, "Louis Prima" became a profitable marketing concept. And his value continues to appreciate as family members fight media conglomerates for ownership of his voice and persona, his virtual body. Thanks to the new digital technologies of preservation and dissemination, musicians, like writers, need never die. They will survive, if nothing else, as economic and legal artifacts. Indeed, the dead celebrity has become a valued commodity, a wasting resource always ready to meet the voracious demands of the culture industries (Beard, 1993; 2001).

And yet, technology and economics cannot wholly explain the renewed interest in Prima. As a cultural icon, he continues to intrigue Americans, though in many respects his virtual resurrection would seem unexpected. His career, after all, had peaked for the last time in the early 1960s; his style of New Orleans jazz had fallen into disfavor long before he developed his Vegas act. Nor did he ever achieve the artistic reputation of many other players, composers, or bandleaders; Louis Armstrong, who greatly influenced Prima's style, thought him a fine trumpeter (Armstrong, 1999, p. 34), but many critics found his work derivative or dismissed him as a mere entertainer. Prima was aggressively commercial, constantly adapting his music to the demands of the marketplace. He often impressed others as less polished than Italian-American contemporaries like Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, and Tony Bennett. Many simply found him difficult to fathom—hard and calculating in his business dealings, withdrawn and private when off stage, given to profligate infidelity, a man with four ex-wives and not many close friends. In short, a person unlikely to inspire adulation.

Why Prima, then? No single answer will suffice. Prima still headlines at a small number of venues, most notably in the acts of imitators, in a biography and a documentary, and on a handful of websites. But, for the most part, he has steadily blended into the cultural scenery. His revival, revealingly, has been more aural than visual. Prima's image circulates, but not nearly as widely as his sound. CDs of his reissued music commonly use drawings or photographs of him; one can find old promotional photographs of Prima for sale on eBay; and at least one fan has designed a Prima tattoo (www.bulztattoo.com). But there is no Prima iconography analogous to that of other dead performers like Elvis, Jim Morrison, Jimi Hendrix, and Sinatra. It is Prima's voice that lingers: on the playlists of jazz and retro radio pro-

grams, on the soundtracks of movies with Italian-American characters and themes, as an echo in the performances of Keely Smith and Sam Butera, as the animating spirit of King Louie in the Disney film *Jungle Book* (1967).

If we listen closely to all these voices, however, we can hear the whispers of another tale. The Prima revival can plausibly be interpreted as a fable of cultural assimilation. This may, in fact, be one of Americans' common uses of dead celebrities: to render ethnic groups more recognizably American. While alive, Prima neither hid nor softened his Italianness. His virtual presence simultaneously resurrects his ethnicity and buries it. He reappears among us as a wild, swinging Vegas showman, but disappears as the driven, restless Italian American who, though popular, never quite earned a place of honor in either the white or black music communities. Prima was often popular with all sorts of audiences. His exuberance and sense of swing made him a favorite performer in Harlem theaters of the 1940s (Dance, 1973, pp. 413–15). And yet Prima, the musician, has often been dismissed or ignored by both white and black critics. His blending of musical styles made him hard to categorize. White mainstream publications increasingly portrayed his act as vulgar or corny, and black jazz critics have simply ignored his contributions, despite the obvious influence of Armstrong on Prima's style.

So my purposes are two. First, I want to document the range and depth of the Prima revival, and the economic, technological, and social forces that have propelled it. Second, I want to interpret the meaning of that revival. In particular, I will suggest that, in American culture, the afterlife promises that all groups can be assimilated, and the wildness of cultural difference tamed. But, deep in the shadows of that afterlife, we can discern other images as well. "Louis Prima" has survived and prospered, but Louis Prima remains inscrutable, a reminder of the persistent contradictions of American ethnicity.

Origins of the Revival

Louis Prima's music never entirely disappeared from the market—a simple fact that would make his revival more plausible to recording companies. The albums he recorded in the last years of his life, under his own Prima Magnagroove label, sold badly. But much of his work remained available. In 1974 Columbia House released two albums of greatest hits, one with mostly Italian, the other with mostly Vegas songs—a sign that, while Prima was no longer news, an identifiable audience continued to remember his work. Compilations of swing and jazz music regularly included his recordings. For example, he appeared on a 1987 Columbia release of tracks by singers of the 1930s. His international reputation has persisted, too. Europeans have long admired his style of jazz, despite the fact that Prima was afraid to fly and thus did not tour Europe as so many other jazz musicians had. This inter-

est has continued since his death. In the 1980s, for example, Capitol released Prima's 1957 album *The Wildest Show at Tahoe* in France, and in England, Magic released an album of Prima's orchestra music from the 1940s. In the 1990s, the London-based publisher Jasmine would rerelease many of his older recordings on CDs.

These albums, tapes, and CDs catered to aficionados with special interests in jazz and swing. The popular resurrection of Prima, however, began elsewhere, with rocker David Lee Roth, formerly lead singer of Van Halen. Roth kicked off his solo career in 1985 with a popular cover of one of Prima's most famous medleys, "Just a Gigolo/I Ain't Got Nobody," on his album *Crazy from the Heat*. (Sam Butera, saxophonist and leader of Prima's Vegas band, the Witnesses, would later complain that Roth had copied—and copyrighted—his arrangement with no recognition or compensation [Jensen, 2002].) Occasional covers of Prima songs marked the early days of the revival. In 1988, for example, Los Lobos recorded a version of the *Jungle Book* showstopper "I Wan'na Be Like You" as part of a project called *Stay Awake*, in which contemporary artists interpreted classic Disney songs. Another mark of the building interest was journalist Garry Boulard's 1989 biography of Prima, published through the Center for Louisiana Studies at the University of Southwestern Louisiana. (More recently, Boulard has benefited from what he helped create. In August 2002, the University of Illinois Press published a paperback version—another sign of how much the Prima market had expanded in the 1990s.)

And yet, apart from Boulard's biography, Prima has figured little in the official histories of either jazz or popular music. By comparison, more famous artists like Louis Armstrong and Frank Sinatra have been the subject of dozens of biographical works, and many other jazz and swing musicians have attracted more serious, sustained attention. It is a simple but stunning fact that Prima's name can barely be found in the recent histories of jazz. Prima appears nowhere in James Lincoln Collier's (1993) *Jazz: The American Theme Song*, Burton Peretti's (1997) *Jazz in American Culture*, or Geoffrey Ward and Ken Burns's (2000) *Jazz: A History of America's Music*. In other works, he receives just one or two mentions, as a passing example in discussions about other musicians. In Gunther Schuller's (1968, p. 802) *The Swing Era* or Gary Giddins's (1998, p. 132) *Visions of Jazz*, he appears in relation to fellow musicians, such as the clarinetists Sidney Arodin and Pee Wee Russell; in Ted Gioia's (1997, p. 67) *The History of Jazz*, and Alyn Shipton's (2001, p. 589) *A New History of Jazz*, he is mentioned as an example of Armstrong's influence. Where given more attention, as in Richard Sudhalter's (1999) controversial *Lost Chords*, Prima appears as an instance of a larger argument about the racial hierarchy of jazz, or he surfaces in books on specialized topics like Vegas (Vera, 1999), 52nd Street (Shaw, 1977), or swing (Yanow, 2000). A simple comparison dramatizes the general absence of a public discourse about Prima. Leonard Mustazza

(1998) notes that Frank Sinatra received steady press coverage across his career, from his debut at the Paramount in 1942 until his death in 1998. In that time, Sinatra's name appeared at least once in every volume of *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*. From his 1935 debut at the Famous Door in New York City through the end of 2002, Prima's name appeared just five times in *Reader's Guide*—in a 1945 article in *Life*, three 1950s articles in *Life*, *Newsweek*, and *Time* on his Vegas act, and an obituary in *Downbeat*—despite the fact that his music sold steadily through most of that period. In the 1990s, at the height of the revival, *Reader's Guide* contained just one cite—a 1998 article in *Vanity Fair* on him and Keely Smith.

How, then, should we explain these interwoven processes of remembrance and amnesia? Why have Prima's voice, music, and persona spread so quickly in some domains but, in the long run, left so slight a mark on our memory of jazz and popular culture?

Memory as a Marketing Concept

In retrospect, the trajectory of the revival, at least, is clear. One can detect five key moments that have made "Louis Prima" a viable marketing concept: (1) Disney's steady, assertive promotion of *Jungle Book*; (2) the inclusion of Prima music in movie soundtracks with Italian-American themes and characters; (3) the increasing general interest in swing music, the 1950s, and Las Vegas; (4) the Gap's use of "Jump Jive an' Wail" in an acclaimed television ad campaign; and (5) a well-regarded 1999 documentary by Don McGlynn, shown on the American Movie Classics cable channel and in film festivals across the country. Each successful appropriation of Prima's music and style sparked new interest among producers as well as consumers, creating the echoes that we interpret as signs of popularity. Music fans in America and Europe probably could have sustained a modest market for Prima's CDs, even in the absence of large-scale promotions like the Disney movie or the Gap campaign. The power of commerce and cross-marketing, however, turned up the volume, widened the potential audience, and extended "Prima's" shelf life.

The 1967 recording of the *Jungle Book* song "I Wan'na Be Like You" would set the stage for the revival. Though highly regarded by Prima fans and subsequently covered by groups from the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra to Big Bad Voodoo Daddy, the song does not resemble the usual Disney fare. An August 2001 story on the Disney fan website laughingplace.com does not even include it on a list of the 101 greatest songs in Disney movies. The composers, Robert and Richard Sherman, generally wrote what one might loosely describe as Broadway songs for children. Their more than 150 songs for Disney in the 1960s included the entire score for *Mary Poppins* (1964), songs for animated films such as *The Sword in the Stone* (1963), and *The Aristocats* (1970), the theme song for the *Winnie the Pooh* short

films, as well as individual songs like “The Wonderful Thing about Tiggers,” and music for animated features in Disney theme parks, including “It’s a Small World (After All)” —originally written for the 1964 New York World’s Fair (Lyons, 2000).

But “I Wan’na Be Like You” is perhaps the jazziest number in the entire body of Disney animated films. (By comparison, the company’s 1968 album *Disney the Satchmo Way* was much tamer, with Louis Armstrong singing well within conventional Disney arrangements.) In *Jungle Book*, Prima provides the voice for King Louie, an orangutan who commands an army of monkeys deep in the jungle. The monkeys capture the boy Mowgli and bring him to Louie, who hopes to learn the secret of fire so that he can move up the evolutionary ladder. The song features, among other things, a rollicking scat duo with Phil Harris and a brassy Dixieland-style trumpet bridge. Such music might have seemed at home in Disney or Warner Brothers cartoons of the 1930s and 40s, but in an age of rock and roll, it seemed an anomaly, especially in a film for children. “I Wan’na Be Like You” was not even the film’s featured song. Phil Harris’s performance of “Bare Necessities” was the one nominated for that year’s Academy Award for best song.

The choice of Prima for the role represented only one moment in a decades-long relationship between Walt Disney and the singer. The two had first met at the Los Angeles Famous Door club in the 1930s. Over the years the two men shared an interest in horses, and in the 1950s Disney would occasionally catch the singer’s Vegas act. Before *Jungle Book*, Prima had sung the theme song for *That Darn Cat* (1965) and recorded *Let’s Fly with Mary Poppins* (1965), an album of cover versions of songs from the movie. Disney may have chosen Prima to play King Louie because he remembered the singer’s 1947 novelty hit “Civilization (Bongo, Bongo, Bongo),” in which the narrator refuses to leave the jungle for the supposed benefits of civilization. But he was also shrewdly capitalizing on Prima’s well-known style of performance. Indeed, *Jungle Book* marked a change in the way the Disney studio produced animated features. The film’s characters closely imitated the personas of the stage and film actors who played them. As one Disney historian (Grant, 1987) notes, “Shere Khan the tiger is George Sanders, Baloo the bear is Phil Harris, and King Louie is Louis Prima” (p. 255). This approach to casting voice actors soon became standard in Disney animated films (Robin Williams is the genie in *Aladdin*). The animators even mimicked the actors’ style of gesture. For decades they had sketched animals at zoos, and the studio had even created a life-drawing class on the lot in 1932, to help artists make their life drawings more realistic (Canemaker, 1999, p. 11). But ultimately artists controlled the style of animation. For “I Wan’na Be Like You,” however, the company filmed the performance of Prima’s Vegas band, then instructed the animators to copy the movements of Prima and his musicians. (Footage of this filming is included as extra material at the end of the thirtieth anniversary videotape of the movie, issued in 1997.)

“I Wan’na Be Like You” (sometimes referred to as “The Monkey Song”) is now widely regarded as the last great hit of Prima’s career. By carefully planning rereleases of both *Jungle Book* and its soundtrack, Disney has kept Prima’s performance alive for decades. When originally released in 1967, the film grossed \$26 million. The company rereleased it in theaters in 1978, 1984, and 1990, and throughout Europe in the mid ’80s. In its 1990 release, *Jungle Book* grossed \$44.6 million, making it one of the top twenty-five earning films that year (Zad, 1991, p. Y6). Its total theatrical revenues, in its four releases, were \$130 million by 1991, making it the second-highest grossing Disney film in history at that time (Stevenson, 1991, p. 9). A digitally mastered videotape was released in 1991, then rereleased in 1997 on the film’s thirtieth anniversary, with extra footage about the making of the film; the 1997 release also included tie-ins with McDonald’s Happy Meals, Amtrak tickets, and Kid Cuisine coupons (McCormick, 1997). The Disney Channel played the film in May 1992 to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of its original release. In 1994 Disney made the story into a live-action film, and in 2003 released an animated sequel. (For reasons I will explain later, the sequel does not include the King Louie character.) The film’s music went through parallel cycles of packaging and repackaging. The original *Jungle Book* album and a subsequent *More Jungle Book* album went gold. In 1979, and again in 1985, Disney released audiotape versions. From 1988 to 1992, it released various covers of the song as part of different collections. In 1997 it released a remastered CD that included two demo tracks not on the original. In 1998, with interest in Prima increasing, Disney rereleased a CD of *Let’s Fly with Mary Poppins*—an album he had made with his last wife, Gia Maione.

Though Prima appeared in twenty films of varying length, the revival has not resuscitated his movies. The singer had moved to Los Angeles in 1935, hoping to break into the movies and use them to promote his music. Prima ultimately found little success there. Like other musicians of the period, he appeared in musical shorts such as *Manhattan Merry Go Round* (1937). And his success in New York and Los Angeles occasionally won him minor roles in feature films such as *Rhythm on the Range* (1936) and *Rose of Washington Square* (1939). But, like other bandleaders, he was often hired to depict himself. His later music films such as *Hey Boy, Hey Girl!* (1959, with Keely Smith) and *Twist All Night* (1961) capitalized on the popularity of his Vegas act. Such movies have not figured at all in the Prima revival. His voice, however, has lingered in several soundtracks in the 1990s. Most famously, of course, Stanley Tucci’s film *Big Night* (1996) treats him as an Italian-American Godot. Two brothers who own a struggling Italian restaurant allow a competitor to convince them that a visit from Prima would create the buzz needed to make their restaurant popular. Prima’s music also appeared in the soundtracks of many other Hollywood films, including *Mad Dog and Glory* (1993), *Casino* (1995), *Forget*

Paris (1995), *Smoke* (1997), *The Bachelor* (1999), and *Mickey Blue Eyes* (1999). In *Mad Dog and Glory*, the shy and sad murder investigator, played by Robert De Niro, invokes Prima as his passionate alter ego. Most frequently in such films, Prima's music helped create the aural signature for Italianness, establishing the presumed authenticity of the ethnic setting and characters.

Prima's popularity in the 1990s was frequently interpreted as evidence of a retro swing movement. Histories of that movement often traced its beginnings to the formation of the Royal Crown Revue in 1989 (Yanow, 2000, p. 475). A parade of other popular groups soon followed, such as Big Bad Voodoo Daddy, Indigo Swing, New Morty Show, Squirrel Nut Zippers, and Cherry Poppin' Daddies. Scott Yanow's *Swing* (2000) highlighted thirty-seven contemporary retro groups; one website identified over 150 retro-new swing groups in the United States alone (<http://64.33.34.112/.WWW.swing.html>). This swing revival echoed a long-felt nostalgia for the big band. After World War II, such bands had expired—the victims of free television, an expanding leisure market, and their own extravagant economics. Older fans, discouraged by rock's domination of popular music, have periodically yearned for a return to swing. (And occasionally, always unsuccessfully, an individual musician such as Benny Goodman had attempted a comeback.) But retro swing did not feature big bands. With rare exceptions such as the Brian Setzer orchestra, most retro bands are comprised of between six and eight musicians. What they borrowed were the visible signs of swing: its energy, rhythms, brass and saxophone orchestration, dance steps, and costumes. The popularity of these new bands also encouraged the growth of a support network—an infrastructure of secondhand clothing stores, dance lessons, radio formats, websites, and clubs.

Commentators often cited Prima as both cause and effect of the retro swing movement. New swing musicians, for example, often named him as one of the performers who had inspired their work. Sometimes the homage to Prima was explicit. Brian Setzer, former lead singer of the rockabilly group Stray Cats, often acknowledged Prima's influence. Setzer, who organized a swing orchestra in the 1990s, even recorded a song about Prima, "Hey, Louis Prima," for his 1996 CD *Guitar Slinger*. At about the same time that Gap clothing stores were using Prima's "Jump, Jive an' Wail" for its ad campaign, Setzer released a cover of the song, winning himself a Grammy in 1998. The swing trend, in turn, created new opportunities to hear Prima's recordings at dance clubs and on specialized radio programs. Even now, one hears his Capitol greatest hits CD surprisingly often as background music in restaurants. Similarly, small, local groups and DJs frequently advertise themselves as playing Prima standards.

And yet Prima has probably influenced the actual music of the most popular retro groups less than their encomiums suggest. From the beginning, those groups freely mixed swing rhythms with ska, punk, jump blues, R&B, and rockabilly.

They made a point of writing and arranging their own songs, not merely reviving older tunes. And though they may have performed Prima in concert, they rarely recorded his songs. In all the recordings of the major swing bands listed above, one can find covers of “Swing, Swing, Swing” by Royal Crown Review and “I Wan’na Be Like You” by Big Bad Voodoo Daddy, and versions here and there of songs Prima recorded but did not make famous, such as “Mack the Knife,” “Caledonia,” “My Baby Just Cares for Me,” and “Just One of Those Things.” Not one of these groups has recorded any of the Italian hits, or the Prima-Smith Grammy winner “That Old Black Magic,” or Prima standards like “I’ve Got You Under My Skin.” The retro swing bands made their own way, borrowing the musical conceits of swing when it suited them—citing Prima when interviewed—but only rarely imitating him. They, too, hitched their stars to “Louis Prima” the marketing concept, invoking him to mark off a space in the marketplace that they, too, hoped to occupy. They referenced his work in order to make their own more commercially and culturally plausible. The publishers of Prima’s work benefited, too, for they could point to retro swing as evidence of the singer’s legacy.

The truest Prima imitators may be overseas. These groups, which rarely perform in the United States, have made the Prima revival an international phenomenon. Bands in Europe, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia have often played his music in the spirit of homage, staying rather close to the Prima standards and Butera arrangements. For example, the French septet Les Gigolos (<http://lesgigolos.free.fr/>) promises a program of “Louis Prima memories” that tries to capture the “Primalchimie” of the “grand crooner natif de las Nouvelle-Orléans.” The German groups Vitello Tonnato and the Roaring Zucchini (<http://www.zucchini.de/>) and Jive Sharks (<http://www.jivesharks.com/>) both advertise themselves as admiring interpreters of Prima’s work. Toronto’s six-piece band Prima Donnas (<http://www.makeitrealrecords.com/primadonnas2.htm>) says it began by playing jump swing, Prima style, then began mixing jump blues, swing, ska, and rock ‘n’ roll. Prima Swing Riot (<http://www.primaswing.co.nz/>) advertises itself as the “hottest show band” in Auckland, New Zealand; a seven-piece group, it features covers of the Prima-Smith-Butera hits of the 1950s and 1960s. In Australia, the eight-piece band Zooma, Zooma (http://www.thegov.com.au/artists/z/zooma_zooma.htm) advertises itself as a “tribute band playing the music of Louis Prima, the doyen of Italian / American jazz.” Prima is also the name of a seven-piece Swedish band that performs the Italian-novelty songs with comic grandeur and more than a hint of polka rhythm and instrumentation (<http://hem.passagen.se/primal/?noframe>).

Not surprisingly, the revival has produced its share of outright imitators, especially of the Vegas act. When their singing careers lagged, Sonny and Cher modeled their new television act after Prima and Smith—he the bombastic lecher, she

the bored cynic. But other pairs have cast themselves explicitly as tribute groups. While Prima was still alive, his third wife, Lily Ann Carol, had already begun performing a Prima-style act with Joe Barone (Wilson, 1982). Similarly, trumpet player and singer Russ Marlo began imitating Prima in the 1960s (on a dare, he said) and went on to develop a Prima-Smith show with a series of women partners (Kirby, 1989). New Orleans musician Bobbie Lonero, who performed with Prima in the 1970s, plays a tribute show with his wife, Judi (Lind, 2000). The performer who most closely follows Prima's style (and approaches his talent) may be the British saxophonist and singer Ray Gelato. In 1980s London, he had performed with the Chevalier Brothers, one of the earliest new swing groups. He formed his own band in 1988, now known as Ray Gelato and the Giants. Gelato's style bears strong marks of Prima's influence. For example, half of the songs on his 2000 CD *Live in Italy* are Prima standards, like "Buona Sera," "Oh, Marie," and "Lazy River." Keely Smith and Sam Butera have similarly prospered in the revival by staying rather close to the style they developed working in Vegas. Even Prima's daughters have prospered from public interest in their father's work. Joyce, daughter by Prima's first wife, Louise Pollizi, periodically performs around New Orleans. Luanne and Toni sang backup vocals on their mother Keely Smith's 2000 CD *Swing, Swing, Swing*. And Lena, daughter by fifth wife Maione, is pursuing a career playing her father's music at Italian-American festivals and clubs.

Swing's popularity made it attractive as an idiom for advertising and marketing. Most famously, the Gap clothing store chain used Prima's "Jump, Jive an' Wail" as the soundtrack for its wildly popular 1998 television ad "Khakis Swing" (Cuneo, 1998; Elliott, 1999). That ad was one of three (the other two were titled "Khakis Rock" and "Khakis Groove"). Each was created by a well-known director around a musical theme. To describe the ad—young couples in khaki pants swing dancing against a white background—does not begin to capture its stylishness and energy. The song itself is pure Prima. He wrote both the melody and the lyrics, and the arrangement prominently showcased Smith and Butera and the Witnesses. The song, as viewers heard it at that moment, perfectly blended '50s Vegas and '90s retro swing. It featured a classic shuffle rhythm with strong rock 'n' roll undertones, and its dancers resembled the young people who were jitterbugging in the clubs. "Khakis Swing" ran again the following month during the *Seinfeld* finale (Ross, 1998). Public and professional response to the ads was so positive that Gap brought them back the following fall, for the season premieres of *Monday Night Football*, *ER*, *Felicity*, *Ally McBeal*, *Party of Five*, and *The Practice*. Over the next year, "Khakis Swing" set the model for subsequent Gap ad campaigns. In spring 1999, Gap used the Academy Awards ceremony to debut three new spots, featuring go-go, soul, and country music. All this publicity soon forged "Jump, Jive an' Wail" into a handy

cultural shorthand for all swingness, and newspaper and magazine writers, cultural critics, and marketers cashed it in (as when Hal Leonard Publishing issued its *Louis Prima Songbook: Jump, Jive An Wail* in 1999).

The enhanced value of “Louis Prima,” the marketing concept, has fueled legal battles over royalties and ownership. Consider the career of “Sing, Sing, Sing.” First written and performed by Prima in the 1930s, Benny Goodman and Gene Krupa soon made it their own. (Goodman considered it a “killer diller” number.) In the 1980s and 1990s, the song served as an anthem of swing in many venues. Bob Fosse used it in his 1978 musical *Dancin’*; by summer 2000, it had served as featured finale in three Broadway musicals: *Fosse*, *Contact*, and *Swing!* The royalties from these uses have been substantial. Maione estimates that “Sing, Sing, Sing” has generated as much as \$100,000 annually over the last several years (Spera, 2002).

Since Prima’s estate was finally settled in 1993, among the conflicting claims of his many families, Maione has tried to consolidate control of his legacy. She has tenaciously pursued companies who used the singer’s persona without permission or compensation. In 1998, she sued Campbell Soup over a Prego spaghetti sauce ad lyric sung by a Prima sound-alike (Von Bergen, 1998). In the following years she sued Darden Restaurants over an Olive Garden ad that prominently featured “Oh, Marie” performed in Prima’s style by a sound-alike singer, though with a different arrangement (Louis Prima’s widow, 2000). Both companies settled out of court. More recently, Maione has sued Unidisc Music Inc., a Canadian company that acquired Prima’s songs at auction in 2000, alleging that Unidisc (like Simitar, the company that first owned the songs) had failed to pay royalties. In the same spirit of consolidation, she has established an extensive official website (www.louisprima.com), and in 2002 she published remastered CDs of eight albums the singer had recorded and produced on his own label in the last decade of his life.

The Unidisc suit sounds like a familiar battle over music royalties. But Maione’s other suits have tested the emerging legal right of publicity. Frankel (2000) notes that “the early right of publicity statutes and cases prohibited only the use of a person’s name, portrait and likeness,” but recent cases have protected voice imitations and “personality and style of performance” as well. The very qualities that made Prima attractive to Disney and other media companies—his distinctive voice and persona—have strengthened Maione’s claims. Most revealing has been the outcome of Maione’s suit in 2000 over royalties due Prima’s estate from videocassette and DVD sales of *Jungle Book*. Prima had been paid \$1,500 a day for his voice work and granted royalties on “all forms of recording and reproduction manufactured by any method and intended primarily for use as home entertainment” (Miester, 2001). Maione’s was the latest in a line of similar suits against Disney. In 1991, singer Peggy Lee had won \$2.3 million in damages for unpaid royalties on *Lady and the Tramp*

(1955). Mary Costa, the voice of Sleeping Beauty, and Phil Harris had settled similar cases out of court. Following these precedents, Maione's lawyers argued for a more generous interpretation of "home entertainment."

Disney settled out of court in May 2001, but has subsequently acted to limit future royalties to Prima's estate. Over the years, the company incorporated King Louie into other materials it developed. For instance, the orangutan had appeared in two Disney animated television series in the 1990s—*Tale Spin* and the prequel *Jungle Cubs*—with Jim Cummings imitating Prima's voice. But, given the outcome of the Maione and other suits, Disney told the producers of the recent animated television series *House of Mouse* that they could no longer use King Louie the same way. The producers renamed the character King Larry and asked Cummings to alter his voice impression slightly to forestall future claims. The 2003 theatrical sequel *Jungle Book 2* does not even include the King Louie character (Hill, 2002). As the final credits roll, "I Wan'na Be Like You" is performed by the band Smash Mouth. Disney's actions in this case likely foreshadow the strategies they and other media companies will use to sidestep artists' claims.

The Prima revival of the 1990s culminated in Don McGlynn's documentary *The Wildest* (1999), which focused exclusively on Prima's life and music. The film portrayed Prima as much more than just another influence on the contemporary music scene. In fact, the film does not mention retro swing. Instead, Prima's former colleagues and family describe him as the very epitome of the modern entertainer. Like other documentaries, *The Wildest* was screened at a variety of smaller venues, such as film festivals, art museums, and university campuses. Its popularity grew after it was run, then rerun, on the American Movie Classics cable channel. Reviews of the film were generally positive. Many critics praised McGlynn for including so much footage of Prima performing on the Ed Sullivan television show, in movies, and in clubs. The filmmaker also interviewed many people who had worked with or known Prima, including fellow musicians like Butera, Smith, and drummer Jimmy Vincent, Maione and other family members, jazz musicologists and archivists, and Italian-American *paesani*. The effect, in general, was hagiographic. After years of neglect, Prima had received his due. Yet, as many critics noted, the film softened the contradictoriness and difficulty of Prima's life and career. A darker tale remained to be told.

Memory and Ethnicity

After a decade of publicity and promotion, had any aspect of Prima's work and life escaped documentation? Actually, yes. Significant silences still abound. The revival has arguably obscured the deepest source of Prima's identity as well as of his truest

fans' identification with him: his Italian-American heritage. McGlynn's documentary may have been uncritical in its assessment of Prima, but it saw this point quite clearly. As one character in the documentary puts it, many Italian-Americans considered Prima's music the soundtrack of their communal life (Lauro and McGlynn, 1999). The revival, by contrast, has merely glossed Prima's ethnicity. He has been praised most for his deracinated qualities—for his boundless energy, hipness, and good-time spirit. For new fans, he is King Louie and Vegas and 52nd Street. And yet, for Italian-Americans, the revival has deeply affirmed Prima's ethnicity and secured his place in the history of American music. It is they who honor him as a son of New Orleans, put his face on the medal of the Italian-American Foundation, and lobby for a stamp with his image. It is they who fondly remember him not just for "That Old Black Magic" and "Just a Gigolo," but for "Oh, Marie," "Angelina/Zooma Zooma," and "Felicia No Capicia"—the very songs that virtually no other musicians (except those of Italian descent) have covered.

Prima's ethnicity clearly defined his place in American music in his own time. The 1959 *Time* magazine piece on Prima and Smith, entitled "The Wages of Vulgarity," aptly illustrates the ways in which others constructed his reputation. It opens as follows:

The brassy, bulb-nosed, toupeed trumpeter, seeming like a frayed hangover from the night before, began to sing and prance. Somehow, his grinding, gravel-voiced antics made the simple lyrics of "When You're Smiling" as suggestive as the spiel of a strip-show pitchman. (p. 50)

The story then reflects on the fact that Prima and Smith's "doggedly vulgar" act is "one of the hottest things on the U.S. nightclub circuit." It describes Prima's sidemen as "writhing" and Prima as "salting [his songs] with off-color phrases and gyrations." Smith is described as "all bumps and grinds, suggestive lilt and lyrics"—behavior that causes Prima to "yowl around like a hopped-up tomcat." The story briefly traces his rise, from a struggling "ham-and-egger" who "bounced around clubs in the '30s, then flopped with his big band in the '40s." It dismisses his Italian novelty numbers as "garlicky dialogue records . . . of little appeal." What was the secret of Prima and Smith's success, according to the *Time* writer? The low tastes of the Vegas lounge audience and Prima's ability to make his "bull bellow" heard above the noise of the lounge. The singer's formula, a subheading suggests, is "garlic and corn." His motive, the story concludes, is money: "The dollars come tumbling down the chute, but never fast enough for Prima."

It takes no talent for cultural studies to recognize the glaring stereotypes in this passage. Most striking, however, is the timing of the story. It appeared at the very height of Prima's career—in 1959, a year in which he commanded \$10,000 a week at the Sahara, had won a Grammy, would appear two weeks later on a television tribute to Jerome Kern, and enjoyed the release of his first feature film in twenty

years. *Time's* tone of WASP contempt was surely evident to many readers, especially Italian-Americans. (How often in its history, after all, has *Time* used the word "garlic" twice in the space of a 700-word story?) But the timing—three years after the *Life* profile, over a year after the *Newsweek* story—suggests a deeper sense of purpose. There was no obvious news peg for the story. *Time* was simply surveying the cultural scene, trying to figure out why Prima and Smith continued to be wildly popular, more than four years after their Vegas debut. The magazine proposed to put the nation's cultural categories back in place.

Prima invited such scrutiny because his persona embodied two contentious cultural discourses—one about the status of ethnic Americans (especially those who chose not to hide their origins), and one about aesthetic standards. Critics coded Prima as both other and low, and discussions of his music constantly drew upon these invidious distinctions. Italians, in fact, have a word for this combination of ethnicity and vulgarity: *gavone*. In southern Italian dialect, it signifies a low-class person. Italian-Americans apply the term—sometimes critically, sometimes fondly—to anything extravagantly expressive, audacious, tacky, and sexualized. Versace was *gavone* (and Armani is not). As the journalist Maria Laurino (2000, p. 52) has noted, the concept of *gavone* echoes a general stereotype of southern Italians as "amoral/uncivic/smelly." In essence, then, the *Time* story dismissed Prima as *gavone*: loud, crude, and sexually suggestive.

Italian-Americans find themselves both employing and defending themselves against this stereotype. On one hand, *gavone* extravagantly displays and performs their Italianness; on the other, it positions them in the wider society, often to their disadvantage. Prima lived on the cusp of this contradiction. He was an example of what Michael Novak (1996) once called "the unmeltable ethnic." He never hid his Italianness. He performed his novelty songs even during World War II. His style was always highly sexualized, more direct and less dreamy than Sinatra, his lyrics more likely to ask than to hint ("I eat antipasto twice just because she is so nice, Angelina," "You can't tell the depth of the well from the length of the handle on the pump," "Closer to the bone, sweeter is the meat"). He also played to the *gavones* in the audience. Billy Vera (1999) admits that this was how he first reacted to Prima's music in the early 1960s. Vera characterized Prima's fans as men who wore "white-on-white shirts; silk neckties; flashy continental suits two inches out from the edge of his jacket sleeve, gaudy, initials-in-diamonds pinky rings; and way too much cologne" (p. 55). Scholars have argued that Prima's style of performance continues a southern Italian-American comedic tradition that dates back to the *commedia dell' arte* (Primmeggia, Viviono, and Varacalli, 1993). Prima's songs, they argue, blended familiar themes of Italian-American life, an Itaglish dialect that included Cajun slang and Creole colloquialisms, call and response with Smith and Butera, and sexual double entendre (p. 203).

The revival, in effect, has constantly referenced Prima's Italianness without grasping its significance. What remains untold is the familiar ethnic tale of liminality and passing. Here and there, in all the discourse about Prima, one can hear whispers about moments of mistaken identity. Prima's dark Sicilian features apparently led others, at times, to think he was black. This story appears in a variety of forms: as an anecdote about wary club owners refusing to hire him in 1930s New York, about Sammy Davis Jr. thinking he was black, about Apollo Theatre fans responding exuberantly to his act. The story persists in the words of a young fan who, having heard Prima's music and seen his photo on the Capitol greatest-hits CD, asks others on an online bulletin board about his race. The exact truth of these stories matters not. Their very telling recognizes the difficulty others have experienced trying to place Prima in the musical and cultural landscape.

In ignoring Prima's musicianship, jazz criticism has practiced its own form of ethnic erasure. Prima remains largely absent from the jazz canon despite his popularity (or perhaps because of it). The main impediment seems to be what *Time* called Prima's "vulgarity." He worked too hard to entertain and please the audience, and his carelessness with money led him to play commercially profitable songs that other jazz musicians disdained as trite and inauthentic (like the popular but relentlessly schmaltzy "Wonderland by Night"). For jazz sophisticates committed to the cerebral, high-church traditions of bebop, Prima's concessions to the audience and his comfort with the Vegas lounge scene branded him as an apostate. For such critics, Prima must have seemed a kind of jazz vaudevillian—a corny entertainer who watered down his music with jivey patter, jokes, and slapstick.

Prima has not been the only jazz musician to be criticized in such terms. Gary Giddins (1988) writes of another prominent musician who was "beset by damning reviews for nearly forty years." That musician, Giddins writes, "was excoriated for playing pop tunes, fronting a swing band, appearing with media stars, sticking to a standardized repertory, engaging in vaudeville routines, making scatological jokes, mugging, entertaining" (p. 4). That musician, of course, was Louis Armstrong, and the critical indictment of Pops eerily echoes that leveled against Prima. The two, after all, shared many musical traditions. Both were born in New Orleans, within ten years of each other. During their careers they recorded many of the same songs. By every measure, of course, Armstrong was the greater figure in American music and culture—more musically inventive and accomplished, more astute in his cultural crossings, more politically courageous in his public life. But Prima was surely Armstrong's most loyal acolyte—the single musician most deeply influenced by his style and stage presence. Indeed, Jack Stewart, a musician and jazz historian, reminds us that "The three Louis Armstrong imitators are all white, all from New Orleans and all Italian: Louis Prima, Sharkey Bonano and Wingy Manone" (Elie, 1999, p. B1).

The differences in jazz critics' evaluations of Prima and Armstrong are sharply inscribed in Ken Burns's monumental television series *Jazz* (2001). Armstrong emerges from the series as an exemplary individual artist (just as Duke Ellington emerges as the exemplary bandleader and composer). And Prima? Though "Sing, Sing, Sing" does show up on the soundtrack (without acknowledgement of Prima's authorship), he himself receives not a single moment anywhere in the series—not one performance among its hundreds of tracks, not one photo in the series book or one citation in its index. One can imagine different reasons for this exclusion. Burns builds his narrative around set pieces that focus on a smaller number of prominent musicians, such as Armstrong, Ellington, Goodman, Bix Beiderbecke, and Miles Davis. To the extent that Burns had already included Wingy Manone (New Orleans Italian) as well as Armstrong and Beiderbecke (early trumpeters), he may not have felt it necessary to include Prima. And there is probably nothing personal in the exclusion. Critics have detected a similar arbitrariness in Burns's other choices. For example, the series pays scant attention to Frank Sinatra, and largely ignores most contemporary jazz practitioners. Under the powerful influence of Wynton Marsalis as senior creative consultant, the series strives to demarcate pure jazz and consistently excludes crossover forms, especially those not deeply rooted in African-American traditions.

Prima's combination of New Orleans jazz, swing, and (by the 1950s) rock and roll will likely never win favor among purists. The origins and ownership of the jazz tradition continue to absorb many jazz critics (e.g., Early, 1998; Gennari, 1991; Lees, 1994; Levine, 1998; Sudhalter, 1999). Musicians, for their part, just play. And audiences listen. For cultural historians these aesthetic evaluations of Prima matter less than our sense of what his life and music meant. The virtual absence of Louis Armstrong from the Prima revival ought to trouble us, for it marks the revival's limitations as a form of public memory. Better to notice that both men came to professional prominence in the age of swing, at a moment of racial and ethnic crossings. As Lewis Erenberg (1998) reminds us, that moment deserves to be remembered. "What is notable about the swing era is how its creators, promoters, and fans saw it as part of a cultural rebirth," Erenberg writes. "Swing was more racially and ethnically mixed than any other arena of American life" (pp. 249–50). Here, then, is a story that the Prima revival has implied but never proclaimed. Louis Prima's career reminds us of the wildness of our cultural differences, and of Americans' persistent desire not just to tame that wildness, but also to let it run free.

Bibliography

- Armstrong, L. (1999). *Louis Armstrong, in his own words: Selected writings*. New York: Oxford University Press

- Beard, J. J. (1993). Casting call at Forest Lawn: The digital resurrection of deceased entertainers—A 21st century challenge for intellectual property law. *High Technology Law Journal*, 8, 101, 111.
- . (2001). Clones, bones and twilight zones: Protecting the digital persona of the quick, the dead and the imaginary. *Berkeley Technology Law Journal*, 16, 1165.
- Boulard, G. (1989). *“Just a gigolo”: The life and times of Louis Prima*. Lafayette, LA: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana.
- Brammer, J., Caesar, I., Casucci, L., and Graham, R. (1929). Just a gigolo/I ain't got nobody [Recorded by David Lee Roth]. On *Crazy from the heat* [LP]. USA: Warner Brothers. (1985).
- Canemaker, J. (1999). *Paper dreams: The art and artists of Disney storyboards*. New York: Hyperion.
- Collier, J. L. (1993). *Jazz: The American theme song*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cuneo, A. Z. (1998, April 20). Gap's first global ads confront Dockers on a khaki battlefield. Retrieved January 31, 2003, from www.adage.com.
- Dance, S. (1973). *The world of swing*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Disney, W. (Producer), and Reitherman, W. (Director). (1967). *Jungle book* [Motion picture]. USA: Buena Vista Pictures.
- Early, G. (1998). Pulp and circumstance: The story of jazz in high places. In R. G. O'Meally (Ed.), *The jazz cadence of American culture* (pp. 303–430). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Elie, L. E. (1999, August 23). Exploring Black, Italian connections. *Times-Picayune*, section B, p. 1.
- Elliott, S. (1999, January 18). The latest music form to find resurrection by mainstream marketers is swing, in all its glory. *New York Times*, section C, p. 6.
- Erenberg, L. (1998). *Swinging the American dream: Big band jazz and the rebirth of American culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Filley, J. (Producer), and Scott, C., and Tucci, S. (Directors). (1996). *Big night* [Motion picture]. USA: Samuel Goldwyn Company.
- Frankel, C. J. (2000, August 7). In star-struck America, broader protection sought by celebrities; the right of publicity has become a significant tool. *New York Law Journal*. Retrieved January 31, 2003, from LexisNexis Academic database.
- Gennari, J. (1991, Fall). Jazz criticism: Its development and ideologies. *Black American Literature Forum*, 25, 449–524.
- Giddins, G. (1988). *Satchmo: The genius of Louis Armstrong*. New York: Da Capo Press.
- . (1998). *Visions of jazz: The first century*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gioia, T. (1997). *The history of jazz*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Grant, J. (1987). *Encyclopedia of Walt Disney's animated characters*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Hill, J. (2002, October 23). What's in a name? Plenty! (At least according to Mickey's lawyers). Retrieved February 3, 2003, from <http://www.jimhillmedia.com/articles/10232002.1.htm>
- Jensen, L. (2002, April 27). Sam's back in town. *Times-Picayune*, Metro section, p. 1.
- Kirby, S. (1989, May 26). Musician keeps Prima's music alive. *St. Petersburg Times*, p. 10.
- Laurino, M. (2000). *Were you always an Italian? Ancestors and other icons of Italian America*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Lauro, J. (Producer), and McGlynn, D. (Director). (1999). *Louis Prima: The wildest* [Motion picture]. USA: Historic Films.
- Lees, G. (1994). *Cats of any color: Jazz black and white*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Levine, L. W. (1998). Jazz and American culture. In R. G. O'Meally (Ed.), *The jazz cadence of American culture* (pp. 431–47). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lind, A. (2000, September 8). Prima time: Bobby Lonera is a leading practitioner of that old Louis Prima magic. *Times-Picayune*, Living section, p. 1.

- Louis Prima's widow asserted valid right of publicity claim against the Olive Garden based on Prima sound-alike recording in restaurant's TV commercial. (2000, May). *Entertainment Law Reporter*, 21. Retrieved January 31, 2003, from LexisNexis Academic database.
- Lyons, M. (2000, April). Sibling songs: Richard and Robert Sherman and their Disney tunes. *Animation World Magazine* 5.01. Retrieved February 3, 2003, from <http://www.awn.com/mag/issue5.01/5.01pages/lyonssherman.php3>
- McCormick, M. (1997, October 18). Tie-ins abound for Disney "Jungle Book" reissue. *Billboard*, 109, 77.
- Miester, M. (2001, August 21). The monkey vs. the mouse. *Gambit Weekly*. Retrieved February 3, 2003, from http://www.bestofneworleans.com/dispatch/2001-08-21/news_feat.html
- Mustazza, L. (Ed.) (1998). *Frank Sinatra and popular culture: Essays on an American icon*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Novak, M. (1996). *The rise of the unmeltable ethnics*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- Peretti, B. W. (1997). *Jazz in American culture*. Chicago: Ivan Dee.
- Primmeggia, S., Viviono, F., and Varacalli, J. A. (1993). Southern Italian-American comedy: The cases of Matteo Cannizzaro, Lou Monte, Louis Prima, and Dom DeLuise. In F. J. Cavaioli, A. Danzi, and S. J. LaGumina (Eds.), *Italian Americans and their public and private life* (pp. 194–211). Staten Island, NY: American Italian Historical Association.
- Ross, C. (1998, May 11). Super Sein-off. *Advertising Age*. Retrieved January 31, 2003, from www.adage.com.
- Schuller, G. (1968). *The swing era: The development of jazz, 1930–45*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Shaw, A. (1977). *52nd St.: The street of jazz*. New York: Da Capo Press.
- Sherman, R. M., and Sherman, R. B. (1967). I wan'na be like you [Recorded by Los Lobos]. On *Stay Awake* [LP]. USA: A&M Records. (1988)
- Shipton, A. (2001). *A new history of jazz*. London: Continuum.
- Spera, K. (2002, October 13). Louis lost and found. *Times-Picayune*, Living section, p. 1.
- Stevenson, R. W. (1991, August 5). 30-year-old film is a surprise hit in its 4th re-release. *New York Times*, section C, p. 9.
- Sudhalter, R. M. (1999). *Lost chords: White musicians and their contribution to jazz, 1915–1945*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Vera, B. (1999). Vegas rocks and Reno rolls: Louis Prima. In C. Escott (Ed.), *All roots lead to rock: Legends of early rock 'n' roll: A Bear Family reader* (pp. 53–72). New York: Schirmer Books.
- Von Bergen, J. M. (1998, April 3). Singer's widow files lawsuit against Campbell Soup for Prego ad. *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Retrieved January 31, 2003, from Lexis-Nexis Academic database.
- The wages of vulgarity. (1959, September 7). *Time*, 72, 50.
- Ward, G. C. and Burns, K. (2000). *Jazz: A history of America's music*. New York: Knopf.
- Wilson, J. S. (1982, September 22). Cabaret: Duo in Prima style. *New York Times*, section C, p. 25.
- Yanow, S. (2000). *Swing*. San Francisco: Miller Freeman.
- Zad, M. (1991, April 28). "The Jungle Book" reappears on video shelves. *The Washington Post*, section Y, p. 6.