

JIMMY VAN HEUSEN:

The Syracuse Songman Who Kept Hollywood Humming

By Gregg A. Tripoli

2013 marks the 100th anniversary of the birth of Jimmy Van Heusen, one of the world's greatest songwriters, and one of the most colorful characters from our local history. Jimmy was born on January 26, 1913 in Syracuse, as Edward Chester Babcock. He attended several local area schools before being expelled for misbehavior of some sort or another. Music was his first true love but his father didn't approve of it as a career choice, so Chester chose a stage name from a shirt collar advertisement and, at age 16, he began a radio career at local stations WSYR and WFBL as Jimmy Van Heusen (though his closest friends would always continue to call him Chester). On those shows, he would often play the piano and write songs on the spot for listeners who phoned in a subject. It was certainly good practice for the man who would eventually write over 400 songs, including around 40 top hits for Frank Sinatra.



Frank Sinatra record album cover

He also attended Syracuse University for a time but left for New York City in 1933 when he and his Syracuse neighbor, Jerry Arlen (brother of Harold "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" Arlen), picked up Harold's gig at the Cotton Club when Harold was called to Hollywood to write songs for the movies. While in New York City, Jimmy landed a songwriting contract for the music publisher, Remick Music Corp., which brought him into contact with Hoboken, New



Jimmy Van Heusen, Sammy Cahn, Frank Sinatra

Jersey native, Frank Sinatra. Their mutual love of women, music, and late night revelry created an intensely close friendship that lasted 50 years.

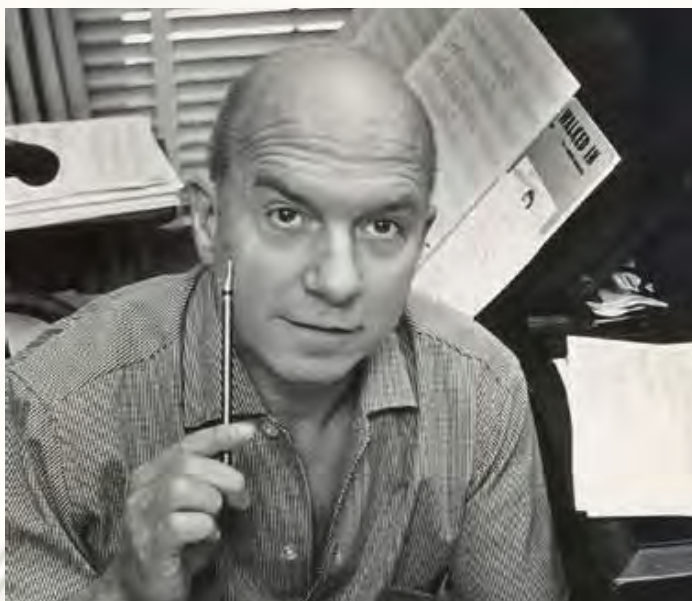
Beautiful music is only one part of a great song and, throughout his career, Jimmy worked with some of the best lyricists of all time, including Eddie de Lange, Johnny Burke, and Sammy Cahn. Though Jimmy eventually became famous for his music, his first hit came, surprisingly enough, as a lyricist in 1938 for a tune by Jimmy Dorsey called "It's the Dreamer in Me." In early 1940, he teamed with lyricist Burke to write the music for "Imagination," his first big hit for Sinatra, who recorded it with the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra. Another of the 60 songs he wrote that same year was a follow-up chart topper for Sinatra and Dorsey called "Polka Dots and Moonbeams." The team of Burke and Van Heusen was so prolific, and so successful, they became known as the "Gold Dust Twins."

By the end of 1940, Jimmy was hired by Paramount Pictures to write songs for the movies and he headed to Hollywood. He earned his first Oscar for "Swingin' On



Jimmy Van Heusen with Lyrics Partner-Johnny Burke

a Star” for Bing Crosby from *Going My Way* in 1944. Three more Oscars would follow as well as the first song to ever win an Emmy, “Love and Marriage,” which Frank Sinatra sang in the television production of *Our Town*. The hit was repeated on television as the theme song for *Married With Children*.



Jimmy Van Heusen at work

Throughout this time, Jimmy was also indulging in his other love – flying. An accomplished pilot, he flew test flights during WWII, which was a dangerous occupation at a time when the military was, somewhat haphazardly, cranking out new planes at a record pace. His hit, “Come Fly With Me,” was a particularly autobiographical tune. To avoid a potential ban from the movies by Paramount’s insurance carrier, he did his flying under his original name, Chester Babcock.

Continuing his work with Crosby, Jimmy wrote the songs for all five of the famous *Road* movies for Bing and Bob Hope. In the final film from that series, *The Road to Hong Kong*, as a tribute to Jimmy, Bob Hope’s character was named Chester Babcock.

It wasn’t long before Sinatra made his move to the movies and, together, he and Jimmy made Hollywood their



Jimmy Van Heusen in the cockpit



Bing Crosby, Bob Hope, Jimmy Van Heusen.

personal playground. Jimmy shared an apartment in the Wilshire Towers with Sinatra’s conductor-arranger, Axel Stordahl, that became ground zero for some of the wildest parties of the Hollywood hey-day era. Jimmy and Frank cut a wide swath through the starlets who populated the streets of Tinseltown throughout the 1940’s and 50’s.



Jimmy Van Heusen

Jimmy was one of the original hardcore, though low profile, “Rat Pack” members. Frank and Jimmy were best buddies and, uncharacteristically, there was no competition between them, even for the ladies they both loved so much. Jimmy didn’t have Frank’s good looks and fame, but he had more than Frank’s share of personal magnetism and swagger, which resonated with women. The famous actress and beauty, Angie Dickinson, who alternately dated both men noted that many people “always said that Frank

really wanted to be Jimmy.” Van Heusen once said “I dig chicks, booze, music, and Frank Sinatra. . . in that order.” He was funny, bawdy, and talented and was the life, and often the instigator, of those famous parties. Everybody loved Jimmy, and Jimmy loved a lot of those bodies back.



Jimmy Van Heusen at work

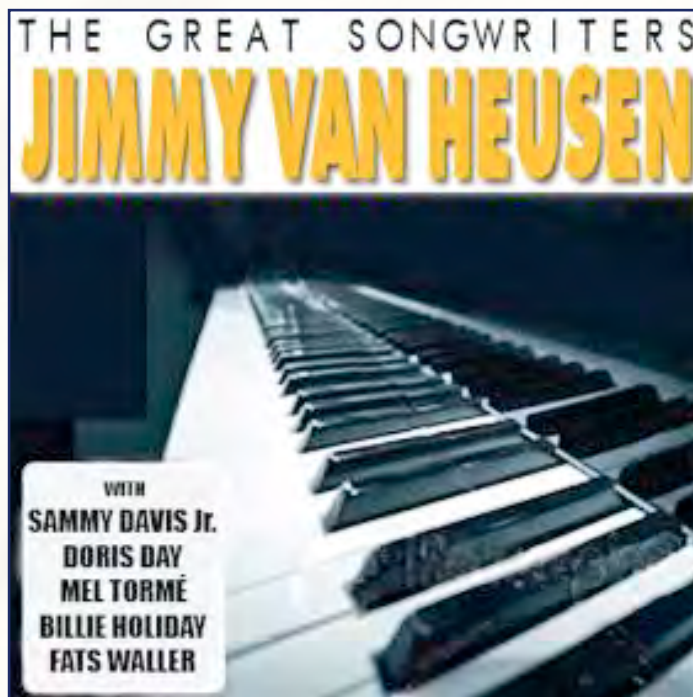
Jimmy was a smooth operator but he had a coarse side too. He didn't hide his preoccupation, if not preference for, prostitutes and his language was peppered with words that would make a gutter blush. His alcohol consumption was legendary but he worked as hard as he partied and the hits, along with the money, kept rolling in.

His close friendship with Sinatra was tested when President John F. Kennedy's advance team chose Bing Crosby's and Jimmy's adjacent estates over Frank's "Presidentially prepared" playground as JFK's official Palm Springs retreat. Unlike many of Frank's relationships with friends involved in that famous "snub," Jimmy and Frank's



Jimmy Van Heusen

relationship, after a rocky period, was restored. At one point, Frank called out Jimmy from the concert stage to ask “Hey Chester, why don't you give this song to Jack Kennedy and see how many records *he* sells?” The song, “High Hopes,” an Oscar winner that Jimmy wrote for Frank ironically became JFK's campaign theme song.



Record album cover

When Frank slit his wrist in a suicide attempt over his break up with Ava Gardner, he did it in Jimmy's New York City apartment. It was Jimmy who got Frank to the hospital and it was Jimmy who greased the palms to seal the lips of anyone who could contradict his concocted story about an accident with broken glass.

Jimmy finally married at 56 years old and was confined to a wheel chair after a stroke in his late 60's. He returned to Syracuse regularly to visit his family and to stop on his way to a vacation home he kept in the Adirondacks. In 1986,



Jimmy Van Heusen's wife Bobbe

he was in town to be honored at a tribute celebrating the 10th anniversary of the Civic Center. He died in 1990. His Oscars and his Emmy, along with many of his personal papers, are housed at Cazenovia College, the school that evolved from the Cazenovia Seminary, which, ironically, Jimmy was kicked out of no fewer than three times in his youth.

Even today, Jimmy Van Heusen's songs are more recognizable than his name. Within the industry, though, Jimmy was huge. All the big names wanted him to write their songs, and attend their parties. He kept Hollywood humming in more ways than one. Though he may have been overshadowed by Frank, and the other more publicly famous singers of his songs, Jimmy swung on his *own* star – and somewhere in the night sky over Hollywood, he probably still does.



Jimmy Van Heusen

ACADEMY AWARDS

Jimmy Van Heusen was nominated for the Academy Award for best song 14 times in 12 different years (in both 1945 and 1964 he was nominated for two songs), and won four times: in 1945, 1958, 1960 and 1964.

ACADEMY AWARD WINS

“Swinging on a Star” (1945) (lyrics by Johnny Burke) for “Going My Way.”

“All the Way” (1958) (lyrics by Sammy Cahn) for “The Joker is Wild.”

“High Hopes (1960) (lyrics by Sammy Cahn) for “A Hole in the Head.”

“Call Me Irresponsible” (1964) (lyrics by Sammy Cahn) for “Papa’s Delicate Condition.”

ACADEMY AWARD NOMINATIONS

1945 – “Sleighride in July” (lyrics by Johnny Burke) for “Bell of the Yukon.”

1945 – “Aren’t You Glad You’re You” (lyrics by Johnny Burke) for “The Bells of St. Mary’s.”

1955 – “(Love is) The Tender Trap” (lyrics by Sammy Cahn)
introduced by Frank Sinatra in “The Tender Trap.”

1958 – “To Love and Be Loved” (lyrics by Sammy Cahn) for “Some Came Running.”

1960 – “The Second Time Around” (lyrics by Sammy Cahn) for “High Time.”

1961 – “Pocketful of Miracles” (lyrics by Sammy Cahn) for “Pocketful of Miracles.”

1964 – “Where Love Has Gone” (lyrics by Sammy Cahn) for “Where Love Has Gone.”

1964 – “My Kind of Town” (lyrics by Sammy Cahn) for “Robin and the Seven Hoods.”

1967 – “Thoroughly Modern Millie” (lyrics by Sammy Cahn) for
“Thoroughly Modern Millie.”

1968 – “Star!” (lyrics by Sammy Cahn) for “Star!.”

