

At Casa Colombo, An Exhibition Dedicated to Louis Prima, a Forgotten Star



by Tris McCall
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Sophia Loren, Louis Prima, and Keely Smith



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About 6 Minutes

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Not everybody knows the singer, but we all recognize the song. “I Wan’na Be Like You,” the swinging breakout hit from the Disney animated movie *The Jungle Book*, has been a gateway to jazz for several generations of cinephiles. Those who’ve seen the film will surely remember King Louie, the monkey chief who begs his human friend to help him shed his primal characteristics and join mainstream society.



Louis Prima

The irony is that the artist who brought King Louie to life — the irrepressible Louis Prima — was no assimilator. Instead, he was the original trans-cultural popular singer: a Sicilian-American from New Orleans whose music combined elements of big band jazz, Southern jump blues, Italian folk, church music and early rock 'n' roll. Though he was the child of immigrants, he never changed his name or muted his accent. In his prime, Prima was a walking, singing, trumpeting fusion of styles, an innovator, and a border-blurrer. And as “Louis Prima: Rediscovering a Musical Icon” implies, it was exactly this bravery and disregard for genre distinctions that has made him a forgotten man.

This memory-refresher of an exhibition, which will hang at [the Italian Educational Cultural Center at Casa Colombo](#) (380 Monmouth St.) until the summer, is a passionate intervention in the fading reputation of a singular artist. Unlike his Italian-American contemporaries Frank Sinatra and Tony Bennett, Prima doesn't cut much of a figure in the popular imagination anymore. No matter how the story of American music is told, he remains a funny fit. When the end came for Louis Prima, life (and music) went on without him.

"Rediscovering a Musical Icon" makes the case for Prima's relevance the way that shows like this often do: through images, artifacts, and pieces of memorabilia that suggest the fun and excitement of a wonderful, unrecoverable era. That means old photographs and vinyl records, gleaming orchestral instruments in vitrines, flashy jewelry and full suits of flamboyant Prima-wear on mannequins. There's music, too, played over the Casa Colombo P.A. system, accompanying a short film of highlights from the star's life. Every song chosen for the show feels like a pointed reminder. For instance, did you know (I did not) that Louis Prima was the author of "Sing, Sing, Sing," one of the defining tracks of the swing era? Before Benny Goodman got his clarinet into it, Prima cut his own version of the classic with his own New Orleans Gang. The sheet music, annotated by Prima himself, hangs on the gallery wall.

"Sing, Sing, Sing" is a standard, and has passed into the greater American musical vernacular. Other enduring Prima hits, like the rowdy, bawdy "Che La Luna," seem to belong to a specific pizza-slice of the American mosaic. "Luna" is unavoidable at an Italian wedding (or any filmed representation thereof), but rarely heard in any other context. "Please No Squeeza Da Banana," a wartime hit sung in an exaggerated accent, is directed at an obtrusive cop at a beleaguered grocer's corner store. Prima, who always had a lighter touch than his gruff voice and boisterous demeanor suggested, played it for laughs — and funny it is. But "Rediscovering a Musical Icon" argues that it was no mere novelty song. Between the jokes, the curators of the exhibition hear a protest on behalf of immigrants who were roughly handled by authorities.

Was that message intentional? It certainly could have been. As "Rediscovering a Musical Icon" demonstrates, Prima was a broadminded person. He learned from the musicians who surrounded him in polyglot, multi-ethnic Louisiana. From the beginning, those catholic tastes were reflected in the music he made — music that made apparent his appreciation of African-American artists, and Louie Armstrong in particular. In the '50s and '60s, Prima never showed the antipathy to rock 'n' roll upstarts that too many of his Jazz Age contemporaries did (including Sinatra). He recognized rockers as crowd-pleasers, and understood their impulse to get crazy.



King Louie and Louis Prima from the Disney animated movie The Jungle Book

The wild men of the Eighties new wave returned the compliment. Brian Setzer of the Stray Cats covered his “Jump, Jive an’ Wail.” David Lee Roth cut an enthusiastic version of Prima’s show-stopping “Just a Gigolo/I Ain’t Got Nobody” medley. Never mind that their renditions didn’t cook the way Prima’s did. They saw him as a promo-rocker, a fellow traveler on a crooked road, and a man to emulate.

Prima was also a very successful collaborator. His close relationships with his duet partners occasionally led him to the altar (Gia Maione, a talented vocalist and Prima’s fifth wife, was one of the organizers of this exhibition). The star never found a better foil than jazz singer Keely Smith, his partner on and offstage during the height of his career. He was rambunctious, rubbery, hyperactive and hyper-ethnic, a man of the people; she was composed, porcelain-faced, statuesque, with a bearing that hinted at royalty. Out of such contrasts are legends made, and “Louis Prima: Rediscovering a Musical Icon” delights in showing us their peculiar, irresistible synergy.

In the mid-‘50s, Prima and Smith took their act to Las Vegas. As the exhibition demonstrates, it suited the star. Vegas meant glitz, and Prima’s showmanship made him a popular attraction. In his Nevada images, Prima looks enthusiastic and comfortable, and very much in his element, surrounded by celebrities, bright lights, and colorful costumes. But Vegas did his legacy no favors. We now associate the casinos and the Strip with stars on the way out. The Vegas act makes money and headlines, but leaves few marks on musical history. While Sinatra and Bennett were cutting magnificent, ambitious albums like *In The Wee Small Hours* and *Long Ago and Far Away*, Prima and Smith were on the Strip, rehashing old material and making disposable records like “Chop Suey, Chow Mein.”

Prima’s long stay in Vegas resurrected the most persistent criticism leveled against him: that he was an entertainer, not an artist. As “Rediscovering a Musical Icon” shows, this charge was often accompanied by thinly-veiled prejudice. A relentlessly upbeat Italian-American who played to the crowd and refused to tone down marks of his ethnicity could not possibly be as talented as those who’d assimilated seamlessly with the mainstream, could he?

Prima neither changed nor cared. Unlike King Louie, he didn’t want to walk or talk like anybody he wasn’t. Prima was The Wildest, and he was unrepentant about it. His vision was broad, and gutsy, and genuinely multicultural. This American original deserves to be remembered, and celebrated — and played — more often than he is.