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“God’s Gift to Us Girls”: Crooning, Gender, and the Re-Creation of American Popular Song, 1928–1933

[After Rudy sings with the band] The audience goes mad. A murmur of delight rises like a tidal wave, becomes an envious moan, pants into a yearning sob, and dies down. . . . Suddenly Rudy picks up a megaphone, stands quietly at the corner of the stage and begins to sing. The audience holds its breath in joy, in adoration. The words drift from the megaphone like a caress, a billet doux for each gasping female in the vast theatre. . . . When he stops, the audience’s breath, held in an exquisite agony of waiting, is unleashed. . . . The audience is enraptured, fanatical. It has been carried up Parnassus on this insinuating, wooing voice. He is their darling, their Song Lover. Give us Rudy Vallee . . . this tall, slender, simple boy, with his blond, wavy hair, his tanned face, his blue eyes, and his gentle voice that makes love so democratically to everyone.

Martha Gellhorn, “Rudy Vallee: God’s Gift to Us Girls,”
New Republic, Aug. 5, 1929

From the late 1920s through the early 1930s, radio crooners were the most popular performers in America. Rudy Vallee, the first singer to become a national idol, redefined popular song: he offered his audiences a singing lover, one who was sophisticated, romantic, vulnerable, and, most important, accessible to them in their home with a mere turn of the dial. Crooning was remarkable for its homogenizing synthesis of American music, as it combined the intense romanticism of the Victorian ballad with the amorality of the urban novelty song and the emotionalism and sensuality of jazz music. But even more significant was crooning’s primary medium, the radio, which offered new

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possibilities for intimacy between singers and their audience, especially a female audience.¹ Its popularity also suggested new concerns. At a time when a white man's masculinity was defined by his physical vigor and muscularity, radio offered a disturbingly disembodied, artificially amplified male presence, one that competed with traditional patriarchal authority for the attention of the family. As national radio and sound films united the mass audience as never before, crooners threatened to become the representatives for both a new American popular song and a new kind of masculinity.

There was a particular urgency to these issues in the late 1920s and early 1930s. American culture had been becoming more homogeneous in the previous several decades, in part because mass culture industries like radio and the motion picture had transformed the country from a production- to a consumption-based economy. Because entertainment entrepreneurs perceived a need to attract a mass audience that crossed class, sex, and ethnic boundaries, they looked for ways to unify and assimilate different groups. This mixing of cultures, sexes, sexualities, and classes disturbed moral watchdogs, who watched with consternation as the white urban middle class began to shift away from normative values and pursue more transgressive pleasures. Black and ethnic music, jazz dancing, cabaret performance, and gay "pansy" culture were intensely popular with urban audiences, and all became part of the fabric of urban life in the late 1920s.

In the early 1930s social and technological changes transformed the entertainment industry and brought harsh attacks on these urban pleasures; crooners were especially singled out for such criticism because of the way they embodied these pleasures in their flouting of gender norms. The Depression meant the loss of jobs and masculine status for men, who increasingly began to view effeminacy as more dangerous than amusing. The contrast of their widely publicized white male bodies with their thin, pleading voices marked crooners as sissies who had no right to the adulation they received from white women. The darkening of vaudeville houses and the rise of radio and sound film signaled an even more profound dominance of mass media in public entertainment. The hostility surrounding early crooners indicates the sexual and racial tensions that were being negotiated as male popular singing shifted from a visible, stage singing to an aural, electronically reproduced sound that was marked by the singer's emotionalism, his invasion of domestic space, and songs that were more identified with feminine subjects and points of view.

The dominant culture responded to these changes by stressing the need to maintain cultural standards by identifying an American "character" in history and media. The establishment of national gender norms was one way in which the idea of a hegemonic national culture began to take root in the 1930s. What historian Warren Susman

has viewed as a "conservative shift" in culture generally is especially obvious in the new moral restrictions in public life and popular culture; the representation of sexual difference was banned from public entertainment and mass media, thus greatly narrowing the spectrum of accepted gender behavior.²

At the same time, however, there was a growing public feeling that crooning could become a truly American art form and a big money-maker for the radio, music, and film industries if its more unsettling aspects could be eliminated. The desire on the part of the mass culture industry to keep profiting from their new consumer base had to be negotiated, therefore, with the demands of white male ideology. To satisfy the demands of both profit and ideology, both crooning itself and standards of white masculinity needed to be redefined. Rudy Vallee's persona strayed too far from the norms of white masculinity to be effectively recuperated, and instead Hollywood and radio successfully renegotiated Bing Crosby's image in the early 1930s and he became naturalized as "America's Crooner."

The details of this negotiation between industry, stars, audience, and ideology—specifically, the importance of radio's voices in making this transition, and the participation of female audiences in this process—have not been fully explored. In fact, they have largely been ignored by historians of popular entertainment because of the neglect of radio studies generally and the historic devaluation of "feminine" tastes. As musicologists Susan McClary and John Shepherd have argued, examining the ways in which music history has been gendered effectively transforms that history from a single smooth narrative to a more complex, contested history in which the preferences of different audiences and groups struggled for control.³ I contend that the gender dynamics of American popular song can be better understood by examining the reception of these early crooners and restoring that history to the narrative of American music.

Crooning in the Jazz Age, 1920–1929

Let us pause for a moment to examine this word "crooning." It is a horrible expression . . . associated with all the unpleasant, smears, wobbling vocalisms that one ever heard. . . . Different dictionaries give varying definitions, although none of them is up-to-date enough to define it as "quiet singing into a microphone, in the modern dance-band style." Their efforts vary between "a low moaning sound, as of animals in pain" to "the soft singing of a mother to her child."

Al Bowlly, Modern Style Singing ("Crooning"), 1934

Dear Rudy—you saved the day! The long tedious day—you whose heart was bared that we all might be uplifted. . . . There is a haunting tenderness of touch in your voice so like your music—it is astounding how closely allied your voice is to your music—it thrills and soothes.

Fan letter to Vallee, Manhassit, Long Island, 1928

By 1934, when British crooner Al Bowlly published his book *Modern Style Singing*, he put the word "crooning" in parenthesis in the title, at once acknowledging and marginalizing crooning's importance to popular music. Exactly how the word "crooning" became attached to microphone singing is unclear, but it was meant to be an insult to male singers, and they tried to disassociate themselves from it. Yet when one examines the etymology of the term, it seems a remarkably apt one for the kind of singing typically described by Vallee's fans like the one quoted above. The 1933 *Oxford English Dictionary* traces its usage to the sixteenth century, when it was defined as "a low, deep sound, such as the bellow of a bull or the bottom of a large bell." At some point in the eighteenth century the definition was amended to include "a low murmuring or humming sound, as of a tune hummed in undertone." Significantly, however, it was used not only to describe the human voice, but more often the sounds made by mythic figures like devils and witches; a "crooning" voice is low and insinuating, somewhere between the ominous tolling of a bell and the soft murmuring of a spell being cast.

These ancient meanings resonate strongly in the way in which the term was adapted in American culture. It became a prominent term in minstrel and black music, used primarily to describe mammies who "crooned" lullabies to their charges. The most well known of these "darky crooning songs" is perhaps Al Jolson's hit song, "Rock a Bye Your Baby with a Dixie Melody," which advises its mammy: "When you croon, croon a tune from the heart of Dixie."⁴ The term moved from vaudeville to radio in the early 1920s, when early radio singers found that they could not belt out songs into a microphone as many were accustomed to doing on the concert stage. The first singer to become known as a "crooner" was radio singer Vaughn De Leath in the early 1920s, a woman whose intimate singing style and desexualized "friend" persona suggested a crooning mammy figure giving comfort.⁵ As long as the term "crooner" was applied to women and male minstrel singers, it was not controversial. But when band singers in the mid- to late 1920s began to be called crooners, it was meant to suggest the emasculation and artlessness of the singer.

The romantic, soothing sound of the male crooner represented popular music's furthest step yet away from dominant standards of white masculinity.⁶ Because of the increasing occupation of traditionally male public space by women, effeminate men, blacks, and immigrants, white middle-class men began to distinguish themselves from others in ways that were no longer simply spatial or institutional but physical; white masculinity became defined more and more as a physical attribute, identifiable on the body. Participating in sports, outdoor activities, and generally leading "the strenuous life" became important ways for white men to draw attention to their bodies. A man's

physical strength, muscles, and vigor were seen as indicators not only of his heterosexuality and racial and ethnic purity, but of his superior moral character.

These standards were applied to all aspects of public culture, including musical performance. Middle-class singing manuals from the 1890s to the 1920s clearly define the purpose of singing as "healthful" exercise that "develops the lungs and purifies the blood by emptying the lungs more completely of used air." According to the American Academy of Teachers in Singing, singing should not be primarily for self-enjoyment or as a means of personal expression, but for the pleasure and erudition of others. It should first be thought of not as an art or entertainment form but as a way to preserve one's physical and emotional well-being through the productive and controlled "release" of the singer's "pent up emotions." Like other forms of masculine exercise, singing was supposed to make one mentally and physically healthy and morally good: "Singing increases poise and self-confidence, and develops character through difficulties overcome." Singing is described in these manuals very much like a sport, an activity one can master that will develop "strong muscles."⁷

This embodied ideal of manliness-in-performance was increasingly threatened by changes in popular entertainment. The high-class ballad, the music form most characterized by intense passion and emotionalism, had been sung exclusively by white women from the 1870s through the turn of the century; emotional singing by men occurred only in the performance of classical music, religious music, and, in terms of more popular singing, in nostalgic songs, especially Irish ballads and minstrel songs (sung by white men, often Irish, in blackface).⁸ These practices began to change as female audiences became more important to entrepreneurs and, in response, performance venues like vaudeville, dance halls, and cabarets came increasingly to employ male performers as singers and dancers whose beauty, sensuality, romanticism, or sophistication appealed specifically to women. One of the most popular vaudeville attractions was song-slides, in which attractive adolescent boys and girls sang romantic ballads to audiences.⁹

The rise of the cabaret performer is another important example. Although the New York cabaret scene was relatively short-lived, peaking in popularity between 1911 and 1920, this forerunner of the nightclub was tremendously influential in the development of urban culture and of the male performer as object of desire.¹⁰ In cabarets the entertainment was moved from the stage to the floor, and patrons' tables surrounded the performer, permitting a new intimacy between performer and audience. The "tango pirates" who served as dancing escorts in these cabarets defied masculine standards by appearing to be at once both lustful and effeminate; they were too interested in women to be true men, and were dependent on women for money.

Articles in *Variety* and the *New York Times* referred to such men as “parasites,” and worried that cabaret entertainment would lead the “new woman” to prefer lower-class men and married women to divorce their husbands because women wouldn’t want to stay home anymore.¹¹ As historian Lewis Erenberg argues, cabarets signified the “new values” of urban nightlife: greater romanticism, spontaneity, sophistication, and physical closeness between members of the opposite sex. The informality of the cabaret made the pursuit of pleasure available for the first time to “respectable” women on their own rather than as part of a “family” audience.¹²

These new urban values did not dominate every facet of public entertainment, however; by far the most nationally celebrated male singers in the 1910s and 1920s were minstrel performers, led by Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor. Jolson, who wore blackface throughout his two-hour stage shows, became especially well known for “sob songs,” nostalgic ballads about his desire to return back home to his “mammy” in the South. While the intense sentimentality and effusive emotionalism of his performances certainly were not in keeping with standards of white middle-class singing, burnt cork protected Jolson and others from charges of emasculation and served to reify rather than challenge the divisions of the color line. Historian Michael Rogin argues that blackface became a way for Jewish entertainers like Jolson and Eddie Cantor to express emotion without being stigmatized for it.¹³ Thus, blackface ultimately served white interests in the way its performers idealized the racial segregation of the nineteenth century and championed nostalgia for a utopian agrarian society represented by a mythical antebellum past.

The advent of crooning meant both an absorption of and a departure from minstrelsy. In his landmark study of blackface minstrelsy, *Love and Theft*, Eric Lott notes the disappearance of blackface after the 1920s and suggests, quoting John Szwed, that this change “marks the detachment of culture from race and the almost full absorption of a black tradition into a white culture.”¹⁴ This absorption is most obvious in crooning’s emotionalism. But, unlike minstrelsy, early crooning emphasized the glamour and romance of urban as opposed to rural living, the pleasures of consumption, and the benefits of a more homogenized culture. Crooning was clearly a product of a homogenized urban culture where normative standards were relaxed. Yet even in this urban setting crooning still caused significant uneasiness in the 1920s.

Urban entertainment producers were interested in adapting black culture to serve white tastes in a way that would not be too threatening to social standards. “Sweet” jazz bandleaders, typified by Paul Whiteman, saw black jazz music as providing the crude material from which a new and “higher type” of music could be developed which would be distinctly American, a new democratic art form. In order

to be properly labeled "American," however, "sweet" jazz needed to be properly masculinized, distanced from its black roots by emphasizing the good work ethic, technical training, discipline, and productivity of white jazz musicians as opposed to black musicians' lack of training, spontaneity ("instinct"), and sense of play.¹⁵ Yet clearly there were elements of even "sweet" jazz music that did not fit the masculine norm, most especially the emotionalism of both musicians and audience members. It is this emotionalism that came to characterize solo "sweet" jazz performances by the male singers who became the crooning stars of the radio in the late 1920s.

Music historian Will Friedwald cites the years between 1925 and 1935 as marking a "gradual transformation of singers and their public. The evolution of vocal music pivoted upon the development of the jazz influenced dance band, and the two forms grew up as non-identical twins in the jazz family."¹⁶ Friedwald cites black orchestra leaders as the great innovators in music, while white bandleaders originated the use of band singers. These singers were not originally regarded as important players in a dance band and certainly not as stars themselves; bandleaders wanted to develop their names through their music and star musicians, not through their singers. Like the Broadway shows of this period, jazz bands emphasized dancing over singing; Andre Millard notes that at this time "all recorded jazz was meant for dancing."¹⁷ In the early to mid-1920s, singers appear to have been regarded as a necessary evil to "sweet" bandleaders, who wanted to focus more on musicianship than on vocalizing; since music publishers made most of their money from sheet-music sales at that time rather than records, however, singers were necessary to make sure the lyrics of a song made it onto the record.

Band singers were therefore most often employed when recording rather than performing songs before live audiences, and were not promoted as solo stars.¹⁸ In fact, when Bing Crosby and his partner, Al Rinker, joined Paul Whiteman's orchestra in 1926 they were used primarily as backup singers for the musicians. According to Friedwald, Crosby and Rinker may have been the first full-time band singers hired in the business. "The mere act of signing someone who did nothing but sing seemed strange enough in those days."¹⁹ In his autobiography, *Call Me Lucky*, Crosby notes that he didn't get a solo with the band for months, and Whiteman tried to disguise the fact that he and Rinker were only singers by having them hold instruments "so the audience wouldn't wonder why we were doing nothing."²⁰

A band singer was an awkward presence in the early sweet jazz bands; a man who did "nothing" but croon into a microphone in the natural, easy fashion of these singers could potentially undermine the standards of masculinity established by a band's hard-working, professionally trained musicians. Yet by the late 1920s, band singers were

becoming popular attractions in their own right, the result in part of advances in recording technology. The development of electrical as opposed to acoustic recording in 1924–25 made it possible to reproduce the range and complexity of sounds heard by the human ear much more accurately, and to amplify these sounds electrically, thus no longer making it necessary for singers to project their voices. Instead, a singer could use an amplified microphone to convey a much more conversational and intimate tone than had been heard before in performance.²¹ Electrical recording especially suited sweet jazz bands because, as Millard points out, “it could reproduce the subtle sounds of sweet jazz. Where volume had been the major criteria in the acoustic era, the microphone could pick up every nuance of the voice.”²² Radio and jazz-band singers, both of whom depended on microphones, became the first performers associated with the new singing style soon to become popularly known as “crooning.”

Crooners, largely non-ethnically marked white men, sang intensely emotional music softly, using the microphone to create a sense of intimacy with their audiences. Unlike previous male singers, they presented themselves directly to women as objects of desire, and wooed them openly from the bandstands.²³ Since they did not employ burnt cork to protect themselves from accusations of effeminacy, they were often perceived that way. Bing Crosby’s description of nightclub crooners makes it plain that many people assumed band singers to be homosexuals or, in the term of the period, “fairies”: “Back in the 1920s, lads—or even grown up men—who sang with bands did so at the risk of having their manhood suspected.”²⁴ Yet crooners became enormously popular during the late 1920s, as the demand for singers grew as a result of radio, sound pictures, and the burgeoning record industry. All three of these industries utilized electronic reproduction of sound, and crooning best suited the new technology. “Sweet” band vocalists Dick Powell, Carmen Lombardo, and Ozzie Nelson, and recording artists Whispering Jack Smith and Gene Austin swiftly became star attractions and their recordings began to sell as well as those of vaudeville stars.²⁵ The fact that their historical importance has not been acknowledged has much to do with their emergence during a historical period in which effeminacy was tolerated—even celebrated—in a way American culture had not done before.

In fact, the appearance and popularity of the crooner coincided with the “pansy craze” of the late 1920s and early 1930s. While white middle-class culture’s appropriation of black music during the jazz age has been well documented, the middle class’s equal fascination with the “perversity” of gay culture during this same period has received much less attention. George Chauncey notes that as a result of Prohibition all nightlife was criminalized, including its middle-class drinkers; because cabaret owners could no longer sell liquor, urban

nightspots relied on provocative entertainment by blacks and "pansy acts" to retain their audiences. As a result there was more mixing between the white middle class and immigrants, blacks, and homosexuals. "Pansy acts" proved to be very good for business, and crashing the gay community's drag balls became especially popular among Manhattanites of the late 1920s.²⁶

While most of the "pansy" performances in heterosexual urban nightspots were the equivalent of "gay blackface" and served to reassure middle-class men of their masculinity rather than cause them anxiety, the new visibility of "fairies" on the streets of New York and the "vogue for effeminacy" they created ensured the inclusion of gay culture as part of the fabric of middle-class urban values. "Displaying sophistication," argues Chauncey,

became one of the ways in which many New Yorkers distinguished themselves from the narrow-minded folk whom they blamed for the passage of Prohibition and whose moral favor now seemed [in the wake of World War I] dangerously constraining. New Yorkers could demonstrate their sophistication by the knowledge and appreciation of the very transgressive social practices that so horrified the social purity forces—be it the rhythm of African American jazz or the double entendre of gay male repartee.²⁷

Urban culture's embrace of transgressive gender roles in the 1920s was beneficial for women audiences especially; their growing adoration of crooners went relatively unchecked by the dominant culture until radio and its mass audience made Rudy Vallee the nation's biggest star in 1929, and crooners became the new transgressive masculine ideal.

"Falling in Love with a Voice": Rudy Vallee and His Radio Fans, 1928–1932

Rudy Vallee is an unusual figure among popular idols. He has none of the dash or rhythm of the usual jazz player. His voice is gentle and crooning. He makes no attempt to "put over" a song in the accepted fashion. . . . Rudy Vallee is the talk of the town.

Vanity Fair, July 1929

By the divine accident or miracle, that is what makes art nearer religion than science, the voice that starts its strange journey at the microphone hardly more than banal fills the air at its destination with some sort of beauty, and with that rarest charm of beauty—uniqueness, novelty. [Vallee's] voice is a new sound, just as much as a saxophone is a new sound.

William Bolitho, New York World, April 4, 1930

*Where others have played to thousands, Vallee sings nightly to millions.
Ad for The Vagabond Lover, starring Rudy Vallee,
Variety, November 18, 1929*



Figure 1. Vallee at the height of his fame in 1929 (courtesy Eleanor Vallee).

After the crash of 1929, radio became the most important source of popular music for Americans and of revenue for the music industry. The record industry had been almost wiped out. The crash also effectively ended the dominance of sheet-music sales as the major source of income for music publishers.²⁸ Vaudeville houses and night-clubs darkened, and their performers turned to radio as a substitute. During the late 1920s, radio networks formed and, by 1929, nation-

wide programming created the possibility for radio stars. The success of weekly programs like "Amos 'n' Andy" and "The Goldbergs" in that same year encouraged advertisers and networks to invest in more regular programming and stars; listeners had shown a willingness to schedule their days around particular programs and personalities.

The first national star created by radio was crooner Rudy Vallee. Vallee was a Yale graduate of French-Irish background from a middle-class Maine family. He was sophisticated (he spoke a smattering of several European languages), played the saxophone, and relished the nightclub life of New York City. He and his band, the Yale Collegians (soon to be renamed the Connecticut Yankees), became a sensation when they began broadcasting their nightclub performances throughout New York and New Jersey on WABC, WMCA, and WOR in 1928. In the spring of 1929 NBC signed an exclusive contract with Vallee and began broadcasting his band nationally. In October of 1929, just two days after the stock market crash, Vallee debuted his own weekly radio program, sponsored by Fleischmann's Yeast. The program consisted of Vallee announcing and playing music for an hour, with interruptions for commercial announcements. It was a terrific hit. Vallee proved to be as popular nationally as he had been in New York, and his program generated thousands of fan letters each day.

Although Vallee was not the first radio crooner, he was the most famous and he defined the crooner image of his day. Vallee's nightclub performances had already made him stand apart from other crooners because he was his band's leader as well as its singer; he thus made the crooner the central figure of the band. Like Paul Whiteman, he was very much interested in making "sweet" jazz music a mass, democratic art form, but he differed from Whiteman in that he privileged the "democratic" over the "art" in this regard. Vallee was a calculating crowd-pleaser; he fashioned his nightclub and radio programs on the desires of his audiences and relied on fan feedback in making decisions about what to play and how to play it.²⁹

In many ways, Vallee's approach to his music and his responsiveness to fans made him ideally suited to early radio broadcasting. In response to early fan letters, he made several innovations in the way he presented music which helped radio audiences become easily involved in his program at any point and kept them from switching the dial. Because he wanted his music to be accessible to people, Vallee played "simple songs," typically cutting out the verse of a song and playing only the chorus so "the average person would be able to carry the melody along." He also foregrounded the lyrics of a song rather than its instrumental accompaniment in order to encourage the listener's emotional involvement.³⁰ He noted that his audience appreciated vocal solos equally or perhaps more than instrumental solos,

and, in response, Vallee employed vocal solos more than other bandleader; in fact, Vallee credits himself with being the first bandleader to present dance music with song. While Vallee played a variety of music, he also understood the value of repetition for fostering familiarity and a sense of anticipation with audiences, and he developed several "signature" tunes that clearly identified him to listeners. Vallee was also the first bandleader to do his own announcing; his friendly, conversational speaking style and the anecdotes he told about each number endeared him to his audience. He created an ether identity for himself that made him familiar to audiences from week to week.³¹

Vallee's fan letters from New York in 1928 continually identify these qualities as unique, "so different from the others" on the air.³² "Your voice is strangely similar to that of a friend, of whom I've lost track, that I act like one in a trance while you're singing," writes a woman from Long Island. Letters frequently refer to Vallee as a family friend and remark on his ability to "bring a personal touch of individuality" to the cold technology of radio. Writes one New York man: "In the writer's humble opinion this unit is not only the best of its kind on the air, but their leader has a knack of pouring personality out of a loudspeaker in such a way in his announcements that his sincerity of purpose cannot be doubted." Another in Brooklyn writes: "May I state right here that 'Sweet Lorraine' never tires me no matter how often I hear it, but just the opposite. I like it more. . . . Give me more of your music and I will say that radio is a success."

By far the quality fans mention most frequently and seem to most value is the emotional intensity and sincerity they hear in Vallee's voice, and the sense of comfort and pleasure they get from it. "I have never heard any singer put the expression and feeling in [their songs] that you have," writes a woman from Bogota, New Jersey. Although he never credited himself with inventing crooning, Vallee adapted the soothing, conversational style of the crooner and tried to infuse his songs with as much "emotion and feeling" as the lyrics seemed to warrant.³³ He focused on giving each note "the idea of fullness and sustained tone," making the emotion in his songs resonate even longer, and was one of the first crooners to emphasize the use of vibrato to express emotion in popular song. Vallee adapted the "live vibration" he could make with his saxophone to his vocal instrument, and found that it was particularly effective in conveying emotional involvement.³⁴ Crooning, as Vallee defined it, was high pitched, breathy, and intense; in structure, Vallee's crooning songs reflected the accessible melody and simple, generic language of the homogenized popular ballad as well as the syncopation of the "sweet" jazz tune.

Radio allowed Vallee to create a sense of intimacy with his listeners by evaporating the usual physical boundaries between the per-

former and the audience. Given the term's origins, its association with radio singing seems particularly apt. Radio was indeed the mysterious new technology of the early 1920s, a new form of magic. Crooners were disembodied spirits coming out of the darkness, their voices hushed and warm and too, too close; ads for Vallee claim that he "grips the audience in the spell of his voice."³⁵ Fans write of the "pathos" in his voice, its "sweetness," "mellowness," "softness," "heavenly" sound; "all I need to do when my baby is crying is turn on your program and she is soon asleep," writes an "admirer" in Brooklyn; "It is a real treat for me to hear the voice of an old friend each night." Another man in New York City writes, "'All sounds coming over the radio seem to sound so dishearteningly alike—and sadly unoriginal as to choice of music. But from your introduction to your mild way of announcing your 'sweet' music—all these conspire to put cheer in the heart of a bored and depressed mortal. Your band somehow has a remarkably sweet mellow tone. . . . The effect is one of bewilderingly lovely sound.'"

While many felt soothed and comforted by Vallee's tones, other listeners felt intense emotional and erotic attraction. Vallee gave the voice sex; he held the microphone close to him and yearned into it. Radio pluggers would put it most bluntly, calling him "the guy with the cock in his voice."³⁶ He took advantage of radio's "intimate" potential and redefined radio's domestic space as a romantic, sexualized space. As music historian Michael Channon has written, crooners helped develop the "close-up" radio broadcast, where performers worked very close to the microphone in order to "produce an effect of artificial intimacy as if the singer and the song are transported into the presence of the listener." This sense of intimacy between performer and listener, enhanced by the "close up" effect of the radio microphone, drew on the experience of the cabaret but took it a step further by disembodiment of the performer so that he and the listener actually did seem to be occupying the same physical space.³⁷

Many of Vallee's earliest fans were bewildered by the strong attraction they felt for his voice, which they most often described as "falling in love": "I am so in love with your voice. It just holds one in raptures when it floats over the radio. You must be so happy to know that you make so many happy with your dear, sweet voice." Others were more blunt about his sexual appeal: "I'm burning up," writes a young woman in Maspeth, New Jersey. From Long Island: "Now for your voice, if you are anything personally like your voice, hell I just cannot express myself on paper as I would like to." Women write of foregoing dates to "stay home, slip into a negligee, curl up to my Lawson [radio] and listen to you!" A couple of these early letters even proposition him, sending their pictures and phone numbers, which

will become common practice for Vallee's female fans by 1929. But Vallee's early letters also contain a large number from couples who use his romantic voice to enhance their own lovemaking and "help to keep romance alive": "I am a bride of a week and [Vallee's] songs make our little love nest so rapturous," writes a New York woman. "Hubby and I just sit and hold each other tight while he is on the air. . . . We just look into each others eyes while he is singing."

While it's clear from Vallee's early fan mail that he pleased both men and women, he seemed most intensely appealing to women, and romantic music predominated in his programs. Vallee played to women, loved women, and identified most with them, and his audiences sensed that; one New York woman wrote that when Vallee sang, "THAT is ME, that is the way I feel." Vallee was especially concerned about "pleasing the ladies," and felt that "a woman's likes and dislikes are always to be considered first."³⁸ Like the adolescent singers accompanying song-slides and the tango pirates of cabarets, Vallee catered to women's desires. Vallee's songs, like those of other crooners of his day, spoke longingly of love desired, love unrequited, love supreme. In a newspaper clipping from 1930, the writer notes that "the last of the Rockefeller dimes will have been squandered before one hears a Vallee song without the word 'love.'"

Crooning songs from this period generally are very distinctive because traditional gender roles are redefined, and women are given more agency in romance. Although men still desire women, it's the crooners who are portrayed as passive and their girls as aggressive. Crooners yearn and plead for their dream girls, who are always portrayed as stronger and more emotionally secure than the crooner, usually either flappers or college girls. Vallee is definitely associated with the college and jazz age youth culture of the late 1920s, a popular vogue in urban entertainment. His Yale background helped put him at the center of this culture, which revered "youth, irreverence, and sex," as one music historian put it.³⁹

The lyrics of songs took on a new significance in the age of the crooner and helped define Vallee's alliance with women and the feminine. As Vallee conceived him, the crooner is the gender flip-side of the flapper; if the flapper transgresses her role by being aggressive, confident, independent, and optimistic, the crooner is most often sexually desiring but not aggressive, dependent on his love, and melancholy without her. In crooning songs, the man waits and pines for the woman, pinning all his hopes and dreams on her. He has no other desire but to be with her, and when she leaves him, he is devastated. What is unique to the early male crooner is that he is not suspicious of his love while she is with him, and he does not blame her if she leaves; in fact, crooning songs revere the independent woman. The

crooner recognizes the fact that women in the 1920s have more choices in the field of romance, and they want women to choose them. They frequently idealize the independent woman in their lyrics, offering defenses of her behavior to her supposed critics. In Whispering Jack Smith's hit song from 1929, "A New Kind of Old Fashioned Girl," he asserts that the flapper is really "a saint under the paint . . . as wise as her brother and as good as her mother. Nothing is wrong with the girl of today. Blame the parents who misunderstood."⁴⁰ Crooners' lyrics often refer to their own tears and depict themselves as excessively emotional: "For all these years I've cried out my heart in tears without measure, but with you to treasure, I'm living in dreams." The lyrics are romantic in standard cliché ways, with frequent references to "dreams," "gardens," and "flowers," again references more associated with women than men: "I'll spend all my hours arranging fragrant flowers—then I'll be reminded of you."⁴¹ Yet Vallee rarely sang songs about the virtues of home, family, and religion, which separated him from previous Tin Pan Alley songsters and connected him more with the sexual frankness of the jazz age.

What was most sexually suggestive, characteristic, and widely copied about Vallee's crooning songs was that he couldn't quite reach the higher notes; the effort was almost too much for him and he seemed constantly on the verge of expiring, always on the edge of attainment. In fact, what Vallee's live audiences found most exciting about him was that "he closes his eyes when he sings," suggesting that he was so overcome with emotion he could not remain conscious. Press coverage of Vallee explained his emotionalism by constructing him as a perpetual adolescent, a "boy" who had not yet achieved "mature" (phallic) sexuality.⁴² In profiles of Vallee, he is constantly referred to as a "boy" or a "youth"; he's a Peter Pan figure, a college boy, a playboy with blond curly hair and deep blue eyes. He's the antithesis of muscular masculinity; his "softness," gentleness, and passivity are constantly emphasized with derision in the press, and with adoration by his fans. *Literary Digest* reported that women preferred to see Rudy relaxed, for "in repose, he's more enchanting than ever," and *Outlook* equated his effect with the "joys of a plate of fudge."⁴³

In his concerts Vallee sought to reproduce the intimacy of radio for his fans by electrically wiring his trademark megaphone to amplify his crooning voice; as with radio, Vallee used technology to achieve a new level of intimacy in performance.⁴⁴ The effect on listeners was intense, as Martha Gellhorn's review at the beginning of this essay indicates; the scene Gellhorn describes is suggestive of masturbation.⁴⁵ For his fans, Vallee indeed provided a kind of romantic and even erotic pleasure that was controversial because it wasn't procreative, not vaginal sex; it did not require a "real man." As Miriam Hansen writes

regarding Valentino's appeal, "it's a different kind of sexuality, different from the norm of heterosexual, genital sexuality."⁴⁶ Vallee privatized mass culture even further by making it possible for women to trigger this response within their own homes. Vallee's voice is frequently referred to in the press as possessing "it," and in his January 18, 1930, column, Walter Winchell noted the sexual ambiguity of the term: "Rudy Vallee is described as the 'It' boy. It means neither masculine nor feminine."⁴⁷

Vallee's popularity in these early years was indeed phenomenal, and does suggest the possibility for wider public acceptance of the more relaxed gender norms of urban nightlife. He was considered more important than President Hoover, and rivaled only by Lindbergh in looks and public admiration. Syndicated columnists reported daily on his whereabouts. Many fan magazines began publication at this time, and poured attention on Vallee.⁴⁸ As Vallee's fame grew nationwide, however, he began to be spoken of more and more as an exclusively female-created star and, as such, disparaged and satirized. His original appeals to both men and the larger family audience were largely erased in press coverage of him, indicating the dominant culture's growing discomfort with him.

While female audiences certainly had much to do with Vallee's success, making him exclusively the product of female desire was the first step toward the establishment of gender norms in which women's tastes and the cultural feminine were generally devalued. This strategy would ultimately have the effect of erasing any artistic value that might have been awarded Vallee and greatly reducing his historical significance. Stars that were considered "woman-made men" like Valentino could be publicly scorned by men, their masculinity openly questioned and their femininity linked to possible homosexuality.⁴⁹ Vallee's film appearances in 1929 reinforced his female-only appeal; advertisements clearly framed him as a romantic love interest for women alone, and reviewers expressed bewilderment at his appeal, reinforcing the idea that men could not possibly find Vallee compelling. His film appearances were huge hits, despite lukewarm reviews that complained about his "wooden acting"; yet film producers made no attempt to turn Vallee into a film star, and radio remained his primary mode of appeal.⁵⁰

Crooning Complaints 1931–1933

When it comes to paleface enemies, I know only three: Crosby, Columbo, and Vallee. These crooning vagabonds are stealing all our blondes. . . . Everytime you kiss your girl, who is she thinking of? Crosby, Columbo, and Vallee.

"Crosby, Columbo, and Vallee," popular anticrooner song from 1931–32

Have you noticed how slushy all the crooners' names sound? Bing, Russ, Ozzie, Rudy, PHOOEY.

New York Telegraph, November 22, 1931

Because of his tremendous success, Rudy Vallee was widely imitated. Crooning dominated the airwaves from 1929 through the mid-1930s, and by 1931 crooners like Russ Columbo and Bing Crosby had begun to rival Vallee in popularity. Both the music industry and the radio business were dependent on the success of crooners and widely promoted them, even as they privately belittled them.⁵¹ As the Depression wore on, crooners' emasculated images began to incur more and more resentment and criticism.

The first well-documented complaint registered against crooners occurred when a male student threw a grapefruit at Rudy Vallee during a 1931 concert. In his 1962 autobiography, *My Time Is Your Time*, Vallee said he recognized at the time that the attack had come because "my vocalizing had been lacking in virility and masculinity."⁵² The grapefruit incident was widely reported at the time and indicated the growing hostility toward crooners, since many columnists criticized the thrower for his lack of aim rather than defending Vallee. In a much publicized address in January 1932, Cardinal O'Connell of Boston attacked the emasculation of the crooner and objected to the song-style's sexual implications: "Crooners make the basest appeal to sex emotions in the young. Their songs are not true love songs; they profane the name. They are ribald and revolting to true men. No true American would practice this base art."⁵³ This attack opened the floodgates. Music teachers were among the first groups to criticize the "modern" singing. The New York Singing Teachers Association called crooning "debased" and "a corrupter of youth" because "its devitalized tone robs the voice of its ability to express higher emotions and deprives it of its inherent devotional quality."⁵⁴ They also felt crooning was detrimental to the vocal "instrument," the first of several equations of crooning with the dangers of masturbation. A subsequent article in *Musical America*, which polled musicians, composers, and singing teachers, soundly condemned crooning in words similar to those used to describe sex perversion: "an abomination," "belongs in the realm of pathology," "abnormal," "demoralizing," and "an offense against good taste." Voice teacher Frank La Forge called crooning a "perversion of the natural production of the voice" and "extremely injurious"; he warned that, once injured, good singers could never again return to "real singing." These "words and sounds of the gutter," concurred voice teacher Percy Stephens, "emanate from only one impulse." Of crooners' passivity, the director of music for the Pittsburgh public schools, Will

Earhart, claimed, "I prefer a riot, even of galvanic, hiccoughing action, to a supine sinking into the primeval ooze."⁵⁵

In previous performance contexts, male singers had been able to rely on certain signifiers to mitigate the emotionalism of a particular song and thus protect them from charges of emasculation: masculine banter with band members, the use of blackface, or a focus on dance or the playing of an instrument rather than the lyric of a song. The physical fact of the performing space and the presence of the audience in a nightclub, Broadway theater, or a vaudeville house also distracted from the performer and the sound of his voice. Crooners, however, are defined by their intimacy with the microphone and hence with their listeners, who largely inhabit private rather than public spaces. Most significantly, crooning is constructed as a means of personal expression for the singer, and a means of emotional involvement and identification on the part of the individual listener. The crooner's purpose is not to enlighten, but to move, to arouse, and it is a purpose that, far from being unselfishly motivated, is a product of his own supposed emotional need and desire for sexual pleasure. The enjoyment of the listeners is based primarily on the assumption that the croon is spontaneously sincere, the product of real feeling.

The crooner's autoeroticism is what most separates the radio crooner from embodied, public performers. He is not directly working for the approval of an audience through exhaustive physical labor, like Al Jolson, or technical proficiency, like Paul Whiteman. Those musicians were examples of America's promise to the immigrant that through hard work he could rise within the ranks. Instead, the crooner persona is relaxed, passive, at play, acting on instinct, spending his emotions for his own pleasure instead of working for the money. Crooners are deviants because their suggested sexualization of the body indicates a lack of emotional and physical control, which strikes at the heart of standards of masculinity. It also connects them with sexually uncontrolled blacks and immigrants whose "spending" in terms of reproduction does not increase property and is thus a drain on the welfare of the state and a threat to white racial purity.

The autoerotic aspect of the crooner is particularly underlined by the fact that he sings to the microphone; his dependence on technology was disturbing to a male public not equally able to artificially amplify their virility. While Vallee's lack of sexual aggression was very appealing to women, his male critics clearly felt threatened by the sexual competition, continually situating the debate in terms of sexual virility and size. Significantly, however, in these attacks the voice is made the sexual signifier in place of the absent body. Critics claimed that crooners had small, almost nonexistent voices. Colin O'More, a program supervisor for CBS, reported in *The Musician* that crooners,

in fact, had "no voices," that they were the sole products of amplification: "in the studio, they are actually inaudible."⁵⁶ Crooners thus made it possible for effeminized men to have more sexual power and affect on women than "real men."

Vallee supporters did not sit idly by while crooning was under siege, especially since he represented the bread and butter for many in the industry. Both radio fan magazines and Vallee's radio program attempted to fend off the attacks through denials of his effeminacy and changes in his image. For the first three years of its publication, 1931 to 1934, *Radio Guide* became an open forum for debate about crooning and masculinity. Because radio fan magazines like *Radio Guide* relied on the popularity of crooners, they were among the few in the press to defend Vallee and other crooners against these charges. Profiles of up-and-coming crooning stars emphasized their masculinity and virility, trying to make them less vulnerable to attack; profiles, for example, began focusing on their wives and children. Vallee provided the *Guide's* biggest challenge, however; it published a succession of articles about him from 1932 to 1934 insisting he was no "dandy," but rather a "regular guy," a "manly fellow," and a patriotic hard worker. These articles deny rather than defend his feminine attributes, and thus try to uphold normative masculine standards. The *Guide* even floated a rumor that Vallee's estranged wife, Faye Webb (whom he had married and quickly separated from in 1931), was pregnant, and tried to suggest that he only sang love songs because women wanted them: "I imagine the eternal singing of murky love lyrics gets on his nerves," the *Guide* asserted.⁵⁷

Vallee's radio handlers at the J. Walter Thompson Agency decided to refocus his radio show away from his own performances and toward those of his frequent guest stars.⁵⁸ Vallee's image was refashioned into that of the show's maestro-conductor, the person responsible for discovering and organizing new talent. The results were very successful; Vallee's program, "The Fleischmann Hour," remained one of the most popular programs on the air in the 1930s and is widely credited with introducing the variety show to radio.⁵⁹ *Radio Guide* endorsed this concept entirely and helped to promote it with the public.

Crooner fans took a different position in relation to the attacks. Vallee had an extraordinarily devoted public, who inundated columnists with defensive letters if they slighted him.⁶⁰ In their thousands of letters to fan magazines defending Vallee's singing, they often interpreted the attacks against Vallee as attacks on themselves, and on women generally. Some of these letters are hurt and resentful, others angry in tone. "Please stop such nasty comments about Rudy Vallee," entreats one fan on March 12, 1933; another on that same day proudly states she is a "staunch and loyal adherent of Rudy Vallee, but I

don't insult the integrity and judgement of other tuner-inners by deriding their individual preferences." Another expressed her rage more directly a week later: "Do you think it's pleasant to endure the things Mr. Vallee has to endure? Men shouting insulting remarks at him at dances! Men throwing grapefruit at him in theatres! . . . I think men are cowards. And they are acting sillier than girls ever could."⁶¹

The defensive tone of Vallee's supporters must be seen within a wider cultural context. Women writers had good reason to think they were being criticized in the attacks on crooners, because the social climate was beginning to shift strongly against them and toward the establishment of more restrictive gender roles in which they were the losers. The hostility toward crooners identified them as victims of the new morality codes of the early 1930s.⁶² And yet crooning was too profitable to be erased entirely. There was a growing public feeling that crooning could become a truly American art form and a big moneymaker for the radio, music, and film industries if its more unsettling aspects, especially its links with masturbation and effeminacy, could be eliminated.

While on one hand Vallee and other crooners must be seen as culturally appropriating other kinds of singing styles, including more local ethnicity-based singers and black singers, early crooners actually did represent an alternative masculinity and a much more inclusive music form than has been recognized. Crooners were white middle-class men who did not consider themselves "fairies," yet assumed typically feminized, passive positions and broadcast this transgressive role into listeners' homes on a regular basis. The anxiety such an alternative masculinity provoked is most evident in the way in which crooning was culturally reconfigured and naturalized in the years following through the persona of Bing Crosby.

*"The Kind of 'Natural' That Worked":
Bing Crosby Becomes "America's Crooner," 1932–1933*

The twenties were great years of "naturalism," but their idea of natural differed drastically from any that has come since—and Crosby represents the line of demarcation. He was the one who came up with the kind of "natural" that worked: the warm B-flat baritone with a little hair on it, the perfect balance between conversational and purely musical singing, the personality and the character. Crosby was the first singer to truly glorify the American popular melody.

*Will Friedwald, Jazz Singing: America's Great Voices
from Bessie Smith to Be-Bop and Beyond (1990)*

Bing Crosby is definitely not the matinee idol type. . . . He's the boy next door, the fellow that lives across the street—folksy, familiar, utterly lacking in self-consciousness or self-conceit.

Liberty magazine, March 25, 1939

Bing Crosby has won more fans, made more money than any entertainer in history. Today he is a kind of national institution.

Life magazine, June 1945

Crosby's persona as "America's Crooner" was hugely successful and brought him decades of fame and fortune. While Vallee's kind of crooner has been largely erased from music history, Crosby has become the defining male singer of his time. In 1931, however, Crosby's persona was very much that of the playboy crooner and his career, like Vallee's, was also threatened because of public attacks on his masculinity. Within a few years, however, both Crosby's singing and his public image had changed considerably.

Bing Crosby became a star in 1931 with the release of his first short film, *I Surrender, Dear*, in the summer (made in part to promote his hit single by the same name) and the debut of his CBS nightly fifteen-minute radio program in the fall. His public image was controversial. He missed the debut of his New York radio show because of his drinking, and he was regarded in the industry as unstable. His widely publicized marriage to 20th Century Fox star Dixie Lee in September of 1930 was in trouble by March 1931 when she left him in a shower of publicity, charging "mental cruelty." *Radio Guide's* first profile of him, in November 1931, reports rumors of divorce and hints about his drinking: "[Crosby] smokes, more than he should. Drinks . . . modestly . . . at least he hopes that's what people call it."⁶³ And like all crooners, Crosby had to deal with charges of effeminacy.⁶⁴ Although Dixie Lee eventually returned to him (in part, apparently, to help his career), Crosby was very vulnerable to the attacks on crooners in 1931; by 1932, however, his image had begun to undergo the changes that allowed him to be viewed as adequately masculine and an acceptable standard-bearer for American popular song.

During the attacks on crooners, Crosby denied that he was one. Instead, he tied his type of singing to public rather than private space: "I wish I could croon. . . . [I]t would be a lot easier on my throat than the way I sing now. I tried it once or twice—in private—when I had a throat breakdown, but I was not satisfied with it."⁶⁵ He also tried to distance himself from crooning by suggesting that his own work ethic was properly in place. No slacker Crosby, he argued that crooning was easy, but his singing took real "work"; it was not masturbation. Crosby's repertoire and style of singing also changed; although he sang romantic songs with pleading crooner lyrics during the early 1930s ("Please," "I Surrender, Dear"), Crosby lowered the pitch of his crooning songs in 1931 and did not visibly strain to reach high notes as those before him had done.⁶⁶ Crosby also sang in a more noticeably black jazz-influenced manner; he "scatted" and whistled dur-

ing his songs rather than emphasizing his vibrato, and his early recordings, in particular, are more improvisational than Vallee's and much less emotionally charged.

Crosby also began recording and performing other types of popular music in the early 1930s in addition to romantic crooning ballads: folk songs, nostalgic minstrel tunes, Western tunes, hymns, and popular songs that spoke of the benefits of home and family rather than big-city living. Although he was a product of the jazz band, like Vallee, Crosby's earliest influence was Al Jolson and he had a large number of minstrel tunes in his repertoire. Early crooners showed a wide range of attitudes toward the appropriation of black music and minstrel songs. Both blues songs and minstrelsy were popular genres, but crooners who performed minstrel songs, like Crosby, usually appropriated the standard minstrel dialect without the blackface. In contrast, crooners who adapted blues songs, like Willard Robison, did not adopt minstrel dialect. Crosby's early hits include the minstrel tunes "Oh, Miss Hannah!" (1929), "Southern Medley" (1929), "Shine" (1932), and "Cabin in the Cotton" (1932); all employ the standard minstrel dialect and feature Crosby waxing nostalgic over "ma massa" and "those piccaninny days."⁶⁷ These songs aligned Crosby with white men and their shared past in a way that Vallee's songs did not. Crosby also recorded several traditional and Western folk songs that celebrated the great outdoors and small-town values (family, home, religion) over urban values, among them "What Do I Care, It's Home," "Cabin in the Pines," "The Last Roundup," "Home on the Range," and "Let's Spend the Evening at Home" (all in 1933).⁶⁸

Much more so than Vallee, Crosby's songs spoke on behalf of the common (white) man, most notably the huge hit, "Brother Can You Spare a Dime?" (1932). "Dime" became an anthem to unemployed men of the 1930s and its success proved that more masculinized crooning could have a valuable crossover appeal. The changes in Crosby's musical repertoire are largely credited to music producer Jack Kapp, producer of Decca Records. Crosby worked with Kapp on and off from 1931, and he moved permanently from the Brunswick to the Decca label in 1934. Kapp believed that Crosby could be a type of "musical everyman," and he encouraged him to sing a variety of different types of music in an attempt, as Will Friedwald suggests, to "turn him into all things for all people."⁶⁹ His film career for Paramount Pictures, from 1932, would follow this same formula, presenting Crosby in a variety of roles to try to underline his comedic talents and masculine "cool" rather than his status as a romantic crooner. Although Crosby is chiefly thought of as a singer, his crooner persona is a product of both the radio and film industries. Unlike Vallee, whose disembodied bedroom voice paralyzed listeners across the

country, Bing Crosby caused no such reaction when he began his radio career. He was a Hollywood boy from the beginning of his fame. His persona was already being narrativized by Hollywood while he was becoming a famous crooner, chiefly through a series of film comedy shorts he made for Mack Sennett between 1931 and 1933 and his first feature film, *The Big Broadcast of 1932*.⁷⁰

Crosby's films differ from Vallee's considerably: unlike Vallee, Crosby is a comedian as well as a crooner. His short "crooner-gets-girl" films emphasize comedy over romance; his love scenes are not played for pathos and the emotional connection between the central couple plays second fiddle to the comedy elements: car chases, madcap heroines, and, especially, "sissy" men. Crosby is always set against a more effeminate man and/or a "Latin lover" type to reinforce his white masculinity. He also prefers the company of men to women, does not in any way identify with them, and is never emotionally vulnerable to them. While his early short films share the jazz age's freer morality, greater tolerance, and unapologetic pursuit of pleasure, Crosby's films became progressively more reactionary. The film that marked the final stage in the evolution of the "Crosby crooner" and the most serious attack on the Vallee crooner in filmic terms, was the 1933 MGM film *Goin' Hollywood*.⁷¹

Goin' Hollywood tells the story of a playboy crooner who moves from New York City to Hollywood and in the process becomes even more shallow and corrupt. The film seems clearly to be based on Vallee, who actually did make such a widely publicized trip to Hollywood to make his first film. While *Goin' Hollywood* has characters similar to those of Crosby's earlier films, it judges the crooner character much more harshly, contrasting his drunken behavior with the small-town values and gender norms that would come to be associated with Bing Crosby the "national institution" and the American musical more generally. Blonde Marion Davies (Crosby's first blonde love interest) plays a sheltered crooning fan who falls in love with Crosby's voice on the radio and tracks him down to Hollywood, only to find out that he's a callow, drunken playboy, not the sincere lover his songs suggest. His character is eventually redeemed through the course of the film by the small-town values of this good woman (a plot that also parallels Crosby's own life, especially his marriage).

The tolerance with which his previous films handled "sissy" boys and similar gender transgressions are handled very differently here: there is no warm friendship between Crosby and the effeminate male (as there is in some of the shorts in 1932's *The Big Broadcast*) and the gender-deviant characters do not make matches with the central couple. The flapper is blamed rather than defended for her aggressive

behavior, signaling an important break in the way the flapper had been represented in crooning music and films until that time. Crosby's flapper girlfriend in *Goin' Hollywood*, the brunette Fifi D'Orsay, is the cause of much of Crosby's weakness; she's the "bad girl" because she's both a flapper and a foreigner, thus underlining the fact that this film is representing "American" values as small-town values rather than cosmopolitan ones. This new indictment of the flapper is most obvious in a remarkable scene in which Crosby drunkenly sings "You Are Temptation" to his flapper girlfriend D'Orsay, who keeps pressing him with alcohol. In this scene she is clearly allied with corrupting urban influences; her demonic visage, which fills the screen, is intercut with shots of shadowy urban dancers. The crooner problem in this film is thus solved in part by emphasizing that it's the bad woman who leads the crooner astray; she's still stronger than the crooner but her strength is corrupting.

In *Goin' Hollywood*, crooners are clearly portrayed as characters who are insincere and should not be trusted, again doing serious injury to the Vallee crooner whose entire persona was based on his fans' perception of his genuine emotion. Here, crooners are aligned with the artificiality of urban entertainment, specifically Hollywood. Marion Davies's character makes this point in a very strong speech to Crosby after he has been untrue to her:

This is Hollywood, isn't it? Everything's a motion picture set. It's all artificial, the costumes, the scenery, the people. You're just part of this, possibly you're just as fake as the scenery. You're really no more sincere than those songs of yours about love and moonlight, or whatever else you've been crooning about. You're just a voice that croons about something that once was real. You're not real. You're just a fake!

While *Goin' Hollywood* indicts crooners, it also suggests that playboy crooners can be reformed into proper leading men, even role models, so long as they can be properly masculinized. Such a process would include both changes in the physical body of the crooner—it must be properly disciplined, muscular, active, emotionally contained—and his acceptance of the traditional values associated with white Protestant hegemony: a good work ethic, morality, family, and small-town living.⁷²

Crosby subscribed to these principles in private life as well as on screen. Well-publicized changes in Crosby's life served to distance him from his playboy crooner image. His marriage stabilized and the birth of his first child, Gary, in 1933, established him as a "family man." Press profiles from that point on, although they emphasize his "boyish" appearance, portray Crosby as a "changed" man, a devoted hus-

band and father who, unlike Vallee, enjoys traditionally male pursuits such as sports, horseracing, fishing, and making money.⁷³ His virility and masculinity were no longer in question, procreation being the ultimate rejection of masturbation.⁷⁴ Reports in the press claimed that booster-club members largely switched their allegiance from Vallee to Crosby in 1932 because "he is more masculine."⁷⁵ Although Crosby did pass Vallee in *Radio Guide's* popularity polls as a singer in 1932, Vallee's fans continued to compare him unfavorably to Crosby in *Radio Guide's* letter page. A debate about the merits of the two as singers continued to rage in the publication as late as 1935, suggesting the importance of the issues involved.

Ultimately, of course, Crosby's crooner prevailed. The changes in Crosby's life and career enabled him to reinvent the crooner image in a way that ensured its mass appeal while minimizing the emasculating aspects of male popular singing. Although Vallee was the first crooner to widely push the new song style as a democratic art form and argue for the importance of popular song's appeal to "average tastes," it was Crosby who was viewed as fulfilling its promise. The politics of the Depression supported notions of a democratic song style that would bond white men from different classes by reinforcing rather than challenging their traditional masculine roles. Crosby's crooner did not offer an alternative masculinity, as previous crooners had done, but sought instead to legitimize crooning by connecting it to traditional notions of white masculinity: a good work ethic, patriarchy, religious belief, white supremacy, and contained emotions.

The contrast between the "Vallee crooner" and the "Crosby crooner" was a debate over who would represent national culture, and Crosby won. This is not how this shift is recorded in music history, however. What is remarkable about the power of Crosby's musical legacy is just how naturalized it has become, how his talent is frequently talked about not in terms of his specific musical influences or techniques (beyond the usual reference to "jazz"), but in terms of his "rightness" or "naturalness." In fact, the words most often used to describe Crosby's style and his success are "natural," "average," "ordinary," and "American"; music critics and historians use these terms to suggest that Crosby's audience is homogeneous, that they all share the values of white masculinity he appears to exemplify.⁷⁶

Such assessments are important because they suggest the extent to which the history and development of popular song during this crucial period has been written through a normative framework that largely devalues and ignores the cultural feminine, both in its expression and in its audience. The fact that Crosby appealed to both sexes is often cited as proof of his superiority over previous crooners, again suggesting that a huge following of women is a liability. The omis-

sion of early crooners and their fans indicates how deeply gender hierarchies are embedded in our knowledge of popular music and "American" voices. By suggesting how the gender dynamics of early crooners are central to, indeed constitutive of, our understanding of the modern American popular singer, I hope to contribute to and encourage discussions of the role of popular song in the public construction of gender identity.

NOTES

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1. For detailed discussions of the importance of female consumers to radio advertisers, see Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922–1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), and Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting 1920–1934* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994).

2. Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 158; George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 331–54.

3. Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), introduction; John Shepherd, "Difference and Power in Music," in *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, ed. Ruth A. Solie (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 46–65; John Shepherd, *Music as Social Text* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

4. A black band, the Norman Thomas Quintet, also had a hit in the late 1920s with "Sleep, Baby, Sleep," another mammy song, which contains the line, "Seems I hear her crooning a pretty lullaby / Just to soothe her baby when he cries." See also A. Walter Kramer's 1913 "Bes' Ob All," subtitled, "A Darcy Crooning Song," which also features a mammy singing to her child; the words are taken from a poem by Frederick H. Martens, written in minstrel dialect: "Sho', mammy's honey boy, now doan' yo' care / Yo mammy's gwine ter cuddle yo'." Sheet music available in Special Collections, Sibley Music Library, Rochester, N.Y.

5. De Leath's successor on radio, Kate Smith, exemplified this motherly persona.

6. For general and more specific discussions of the perceived threat to white masculinity during the late Victorian period and the early part of this century, see Chauncey, *Gay New York*; Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925*, 2d ed. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1988); Michael S. Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Free Press, 1996); E. Anthony Rotundo, *Amer-*

ican Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era (New York: Basic Books, 1993); Joseph Pleck and Elizabeth H. Pleck, eds., *The American Man* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1980). For a thorough synthesis of many of the above sources including primary sources, see Gaylyn Studlar, *This Mad Masquerade: Stardom and Masculinity in the Jazz Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), introduction and chapter 1. For a good general analysis of whiteness and masculinity, see Richard Dyer, *White* (New York: Routledge, 1997), especially chaps. 1 and 4.

7. The American Academy of Teachers in Singing, "Reasons for Studying Singing," *Etude* (July 1931): 510. These manuals were reprinted extensively in music journals during the crisis over crooners in the early 1930s. See also Wayne Kostenbaum's brief discussion of early singing manuals and their significance in *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 167–75.

8. See Charles Hamm's thorough analysis of the development of the ballad form from the late nineteenth century through the early twentieth century in *Irving Berlin, Songs from the Melting Pot: The Formative Years, 1907–1914* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 137–72.

9. Charles Harris, *After the Ball: Forty Years of Melody* (New York: Frank-Maurice, 1926), 254.

10. My discussion of the cabaret scene relies heavily on historian Lewis Erenberg's extensive research from chap. 4 of *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

11. *Ibid.*, 85.

12. *Ibid.*, 113–14.

13. Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

14. Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 7. See also Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1995), 361.

15. See, for example, "King Jazz and the Jazz Kings," *Literary Digest* (Jan. 30, 1926): 37–42; Paul Whiteman, "Jazz," *Saturday Evening Post*, February 27, 1926, 3–5; "The Anatomy of Jazz," *Harper's*, April 1926, 578–85. The opinion of Roger Wolf Kahn, another young white bandleader of the time, is representative of the general view that "there are glaring faults, musically, in most of jazz, and these faults must be eradicated. . . . [White bands] will develop a distant and higher type of music" ("King Jazz," 38).

16. Will Friedwald, *Jazz Singing: America's Great Voices from Bessie Smith to Bebop and Beyond* (New York: Scribner's, 1990), 50–51.

17. Andre Millard, *A History of Recorded Sound* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 104–5.

18. For an analysis of the relationship between the recording industry and the publishing industry, see Philip Ennis, *The Seventh Stream: The Emergence of Rock and Roll in American Popular Music* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1992), esp. chap. 2: "Publisher against Broadcaster," 42–70.

19. Friedwald, *Jazz Singing*, 30.

20. Bing Crosby, *Call Me Lucky* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1953), 83.

21. Millard, *A History of Recorded Sound*, 143. See also Michael Chanan, *Repeated Takes: A Short History of Recording and Its Effects on Music* (New York: Versor, 1995), chap. 4, "Recording Electrified."

22. Millard, *A History of Recorded Sound*, 129.

23. My description has been distilled from a number of histories of "classic pop," among them Roy Hemming and David Hadju, *Discovering Great Singers of Classic Pop* (New York: Newmarket Press, 1991); Friedwald, *Jazz Singing*; Henry Pleasants, *The Great American Popular Singers* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974); Gene Lees, *Singers and*

the Song (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); and Gary Giddins, *Jazz and American Pop* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

24. Crosby, *Call Me Lucky*, 76–77. The use of the term “homosexual” must be made historically precise; as scholar George Chauncey has shown, the present-day connotation of homosexual was becoming much more prevalent in the 1920s and 1930s, and so it is possible that some people judged these singers to be homosexuals in the current sense. It is much more likely, however, that these singers were thought of primarily as “gender inverts,” or “fairies,” since one’s identity was primarily based on one’s gender identity rather than one’s sexual preference at that time. The latter would seem to be Crosby’s position. For a discussion of homosexuality in this period, see Chauncey, *Gay New York*, chap. 2.

25. Gene Austin’s 1927 recording of “My Blue Heaven,” for example, was the most popular recording of the day; its success was not equaled until Bing Crosby’s “White Christmas.”

26. Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 309–10.

27. *Ibid.*, 327.

28. Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 99.

29. Rudy Vallee, *Vagabond Dreams Come True* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1930), 87, 160.

30. *Ibid.*, 32–33.

31. In doing so, Vallee took his cue from the female radio crooners who preceded him. In order to compensate for the loss of the body, radio crooners, beginning with female crooner Vaughn De Leath, not only did not project their voices in traditional ways, but they also chatted with their listeners; they created an identifiable personality. The most successful early crooners like De Leath were able to embody their voices, to play a particular role that appealed to their listeners: De Leath was the soothing friend.

32. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from Rudy Vallee’s fan letters come from the original letters, contained in scrapbooks in the Rudy Vallee Collection, the American Library of Radio and Television, the Thousand Oaks Library, Thousand Oaks, California (hereafter Rudy Vallee Collection).

33. Vallee, *Vagabond Dreams Come True*, 256.

34. *Ibid.*, 41. The material on “vibrato” comes from a talk Rudy Vallee gave at the J. Walter Thompson Company, his program’s sponsor, on March 31, 1930. Staff Meeting Minutes, J. Walter Thompson Archive, Duke University, Durham, N.C.

35. *Variety*, 18 Nov. 1929, 31.

36. Rudy Vallee, interviewed by Ronald L. Davis for the Southern Methodist Oral History Project (122), 4 Oct. 1975, 16.

37. Chanan, *Repeated Takes*, 60.

38. Vallee, *Vagabond Dreams Come True*, 55.

39. Hemming and Hadju, *Discovering Great Singers of Classic Pop*, 32.

40. “Whispering” Jack Smith with the Victor Orchestra, Rose, BE-51659–1, 1929.

41. Russ Columbo and His Orchestra, “Living in Dreams,” Green, BS-73019–1, 1932, and Rudy Vallee and the Connecticut Yankees, “I’ll Be Reminded of You,” Smith and Heyman, BE-57125–1, 1929.

42. Vallee’s cracking voice no doubt contributed to this characterization of him as immature; a cracking male voice or one that was perceived as not “changed” was a cultural stigma, a sign of sexual perversity. See Sander Gilman, *Reading Opera* (1988), quoted in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, ed. Elizabeth Wood, Philip Brett, and Gary C. Thomas (New York: Routledge, 1994), 32.

43. See *Vanity Fair*, July 1929, 47; *The Literary Digest*, Oct. 19, 1929, 46; *Outlook*, Sept. 11, 1929, 58. In his article, “Don’t Look Now: The Instabilities of the Male Pin-Up,” Richard Dyer argues that images of men for women must “disavow passivity if they are to be kept in line with dominant ideas of masculinity-as-activity”; hence, men

throughout the twentieth century are most often shown in poses of activity, or, when supine, with taut and controlled muscles. Photos of Vallee, by contrast, often show his body completely relaxed and passive. Dyer, *Only Entertainment* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 103–19.

44. Vallee, *Vagabond Dreams Come True*, 67–68.

45. In the 1933 Crosby film *Goin' Hollywood*, Marion Davies plays a crooning fan of Crosby's who follows him to Hollywood. There is a prolonged scene in which she is lying in bed listening to him sing on the radio and fantasizing about being with him. The scene is remarkable for the ways it clearly suggests masturbation; Davies's fantasy shots are cross-cut with shots of her in bed, smiling, arching her back, and tipping her head back. This was the year before the Production Code took full effect.

46. Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship and American Silent Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 292–93.

47. Scrapbooks, Rudy Vallee Collection.

48. See, for example, the first issues of *Radio Guide*, 31 Oct. 1931 and 21 Jan. 1932, and others in Vallee's scrapbooks, Rudy Vallee Collection.

49. Studlar, *This Mad Masquerade*, 92.

50. In 1929 Vallee appeared in two musical short films, *Rudy Vallee and His Connecticut Yankees* and *Radio Rhythm*, had a cameo appearance in the Ziegfeld Follies variety film *Glorifying the American Girl*, and played the lead role in a film meant to capitalize on the popularity of his song, "I'm Just a Vagabond Lover," *The Vagabond Lover*. What's remarkable about these roles, and what makes them different from Crosby's a few years later, is that they in no way attempt to establish Vallee as a film actor; they instead attempt to reproduce the effects of his radio and concert performances. For a more detailed discussion of these appearances, see my article, "Real Men Don't Sing Ballads: The Radio Crooner in Hollywood, 1929–1933," in the anthology *Cinema and Popular Song*, ed. Pam Robertson Wojcik and Arthur Knight (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, forthcoming).

51. See Staff Meeting Minutes, J. Walter Thompson Archive, Duke University. The J. Walter Thompson Agency sponsored Vallee's program.

52. Rudy Vallee, *My Time Is Your Time* (New York: Ivan Obolensky, 1962), 91.

53. *New York Times*, Jan. 1, 1932, 32.

54. *New York Times*, Feb. 23, 1932, 19, and *The Musician* (March 1932): 3.

55. *Musical America* (May 25, 1932): 6–8. This article was widely reprinted.

56. *The Musician* (Jan. 1932): 17.

57. See, especially *Radio Guide* articles from Jan. 21, 1932, April 16 and 30, 1933, May 26, July 28, and Nov. 10, 1934.

58. While the executives at JWT don't explicitly state that they are reacting to the criticism of Vallee's singing style in making this decision, they see Vallee's popularity as having peaked in 1930 and are concerned about ways to keep Vallee fans while attracting other listeners as well. See Creative Staff Meeting Minutes, Feb. 13, 1930, and Dec. 21, 1932, J. Walter Thompson Agency archives.

59. Vallee himself has been credited with discovering the likes of Alice Faye and Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy. Vallee thus became the "author" of the program, both in order to sell the program commercially and as a way of promoting the high-culture concept of authorship and individual genius. In actual fact, Vallee had little control over the guest stars on the show. See Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, 213–14.

60. From the beginning of Vallee's fame in New York, his fans took an unusually active interest in his life and representation in the media, to the extent that a police precinct in New Jersey received hundreds of letters protesting Vallee's widely publicized arrest for speeding in August of 1929. More typically, columnists received letters for slighting Vallee. A *Daily News* clipping from early 1929 reads, "Just as we expected! Our remark of yesterday that there are orchestras on the air which from a

musical standpoint are better than Rudy Vallee's has produced much mail demanding our scalp. . . . One anonymous reader writes that Rudy has the greatest orchestra in the world on the air, on the stage, in the concert hall, or, in fact, anywhere! Even the Philharmonic must take a back seat. 'The radio isn't worth listening to unless the King of the Air is on, which means Rudy himself,' writes this enthusiast. 'I hope THE NEWS fires you and gets a good man to take your place—someone who understands good music.'" Frequently, columnists would criticize Vallee just to get publicity because such jabs generated huge response; they then frequently printed the most extreme letters and ridiculed them. Walter Winchell accused Mark Hellinger of same in June 1929. Scrapbooks, Rudy Vallee Collection.

61. See multiple letters printed in *Radio Guide's* "Voice of the Listener" column from March 12 and 19, April 9, Aug. 20, Sept. 3, 1933, and March 31, 1934.

62. Chauncey argues that the repeal of Prohibition "served to draw new boundaries between the acceptable and the unacceptable, and to impose sanctions against the latter." The State Liquor Authority in New York began to sanction the public assembly of homosexuals, reasserting normative gender behavior "in dress, speech patterns, and modes of carrying one's body." Cities and states around the country eventually followed suit. New regulations across the country were also adopted against the representation of homosexuality in nightclubs, vaudeville, theatre, and in film, whereby the 1934 Production Code eliminated their presence on the screen. Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 335–53.

63. *Radio Guide*, Nov. 28, 1931.

64. Barry Ulanov, *The Incredible Crosby* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1948), 92–93.

65. Ted Crosby, *The Story of Bing Crosby* (New York: World Publishing, 1946), 200.

66. In *Call Me Lucky*, Crosby claims that he lost his voice for a time in 1931, and that when it returned it was "a tone or two lower" than before. Crosby, *Call Me Lucky*, 113. Other biographies make no mention of this, and in fact, refute the story, suggesting that Crosby's drunkenness accounted for the lost time performing.

67. Two of these songs were first recorded while Crosby was working in Paul Whiteman's orchestra (Whiteman also was partial to plantation songs). Bing Crosby, with Paul Whiteman and His Orchestra, "Oh! Miss Hannah," J. Deppen–T. Hollinsworth, Columbia 1945–D and "Southern Medley," S. Foster, Columbia Private Pressing; Bing Crosby with studio orchestra, "Shine," F. Dabney–C. Mack–L. Brown, Brunswick 6276; Bing Crosby, with Lennie Hayton and His Orchestra, "Cabin in the Cotton," Brunswick 6329.

68. Bing Crosby, with the studio orchestra, "What Do I Care, It's Home!," R. Turk-Smolin, Brunswick 6515; Bing Crosby, with Jimmie Grier and His Orchestra, "There's a Cabin in the Pines," B. Hill, Brunswick 6610; Bing Crosby, with Lennie Hayton and His Orchestra, "The Last Round-Up," B. Hill, Brunswick 6663; Bing Crosby, with Lennie Hayton and His Orchestra, "Home on the Range," traditional, Brunswick 6663; Bing Crosby, with Lennie Hayton and His Orchestra, "Let's Spend an Evening at Home," H. Barris–A. Freed, Brunswick 6724.

69. Friedwald, *Jazz Singing*, 38. Crosby concurs in his autobiography, saying that "Jack was always trying to make me the top figure in recording. . . . He wouldn't let me get typed." Crosby, *Call Me Lucky*, 139.

70. Crosby's film resumé actually began with a brief appearance with the Rhythm Boys in *The King of Jazz*, Universal's 1930 revue with Paul Whiteman and His Orchestra (dir. John Murray Anderson, 1930). Crosby's short films, in which he was starred, were *I Surrender, Dear* (dir. Mack Sennett, 1931), *Just One More Chance* (dir. Mack Sennett, 1931), *Billboard Girl* (dir. Leslie Pearce, 1932), *Dream House* (a.k.a. *Crooner's Holiday*) (dir. Del Lord, 1932), *Blues of the Night* (dir. Leslie Pearce, 1933) *Sing, Bing, Sing* (dir. Babe Stafford, 1933), and *Bring on Bing* (dir. Mack Sennett, 1933). His first feature for Paramount was 1932's *The Big Broadcast of 1932* (dir. Frank Tuttle, 1932) which en-

sured his future as a film star. Again, for more detailed discussion of Crosby's films, see Wojcik and Knight, eds., *Cinema and Popular Song*.

71. *Goin' Hollywood* (dir. Raoul Walsh, 1933).

72. This change in the portrayal of crooners must, of course, be seen within the larger context of the moral crackdown on the representation of gender transgressive characters generally, and, in cinema, the strict adoption of the Hollywood Production Code in 1934, which banned "sex perversion" from the screen. See Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 353, and, for a more detailed description, Richard Maltby's "The Production Code and the Hays Office," in *Tino Balio's Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 37-72.

73. Crosby and his wife, former Fox star Dixie Lee, had four sons: Gary, born in 1933; twins Phillip and Dennis, born in 1934; and Lindsay, born in 1937. Vallee had no children. Crosby's promoters and *Radio Guide* worked hard to transform Crosby's image. Articles from February 1932 stress Crosby's role as a family man and claim that his singing is more manly than that of other crooners. See, in addition, March 31, 1932 (two articles), July 21 and Aug. 4, 1934, and a three-part article in 1935, Sept. 21-Oct. 5.

74. In 1939 *Liberty* magazine's review of Bing Crosby's career credits the birth of his boys with deflecting charges of emasculation: "It hasn't always been easy to be a crooner. Remember that song, 'Crosby, Columbo and Vallee'? It wasn't a very complimentary song. At the time, it sounded like the funeral dirge for all three of them. Something had to be done about it. Russ got Carole Lombard to fall in love with him. Bing Crosby had twins," *Liberty* (March 25, 1939): 57.

75. Noted in *The Judge* (Jan. 25, 1932): 14. Any hint of Crosby's questionable masculinity disappeared thereafter; stories about him ten years later refer to his early playboy days as the time when "he sowed his wild oats"; see, for example, *Saturday Evening Post*, Oct. 31, 1942, 36-39.

76. Music critic Henry Pleasants's assessment of Crosby is exemplary: "Crosby was the anti-hero, the ordinary, middle-class, middle city American male. . . . His hobbies exceptional and unexceptional: golf, baseball, hunting, fishing, the racetrack, the family. He was Joe Average. This was the basis of his appeal to millions of Americans." Henry Pleasants, *The Great American Popular Singers* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), 128. See also Gary Giddins, *Riding a Blue Note: Jazz and American Pop* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); Gary Giddins, the preface to Crosby's *Call Me Lucky*; Lees, "The Sinatra Effect," in *Singers and the Song*; Hemming and Hajdu, *Discovering Great Singers of Classic Pop*. Although more detailed and thoughtful in his analysis of early crooners than most, Lewis Erenberg's recent book, *Swingin' the Dream*, continues the practice of viewing Crosby as the "natural" and "average" antidote to "the anguished and languid voices" of early crooners like Vallee, whom he sees as representing "youth's inability in the early 1930s to recognize their dreams of the 1920s. Especially prominent was the sense that modern society had reduced the power of the once-masterful individual male. Overwhelmed by feelings of personal failure, young people's tastes showed uncertainty, a destabilization of gender roles, and a desire for security." As he does throughout this chapter, Erenberg conflates the feelings of men and women into a single "youth" culture, and never considers the possibility that early crooners were intensely popular *because* they represented an alternative masculinity to their many fans, who welcomed rather than mourned the destabilization of gender roles. Lewis Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 3-24. The only assessment of that period in popular song I have found that denaturalizes Crosby's All-American persona and its cultural significance is musicologist David Brackett's chapter, "Family Values in Music? Billie Holiday's and Bing Crosby's 'I'll Be Seeing You'" from his book *Interpreting Popular Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).