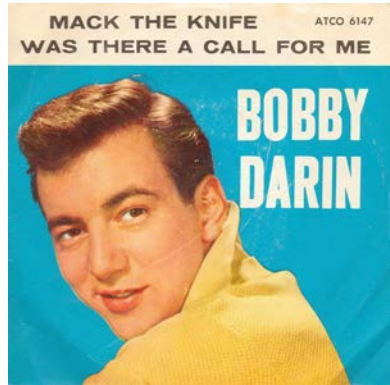


“Mack the Knife”—Bobby Darin (1959)

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Essay by Jimmy Scalia (guest post)*



45rpm sleeve



45rpm label



Darin with "Hesh"***

The quintessential recording of Bobby Darin's "Mack the Knife," in retrospect, most likely did not come about by accident. As Darin mentions on his greatest hits album, "The Bobby Darin Story," in a flip manner, "Ya know I still can't believe it but that record made it to the number one spot in the country. Now, nobody planned it that way, it just happened to happen. Well, I guess that just goes to show ya that accidents sometimes turn out for the best." In all the years of analyzing the history, makeup, artistry, focus and talents of Bobby Darin, I would be remised to believe this was an accident, to be chalked up as an "all by chance note in the musical history books."

But before going into his rendition of this song, let us look at Darin as an artist. Few would contest that the young performer was well rounded in his musical tastes but even more impressive than that was his ability to transcend many genres, not only as a singer, but as a songwriter.

After a few years of fine tuning his craft as a singer from 1956 to 1958, Darin hit success with his self-penned tune "Splish Splash" which helped establish his reputation as a "rock and roll" singer. Soon, other self-penned tunes such as "Queen of The Hop," "Early in the Morning" and "Dream Lover," followed and he officially won over the younger audience. At one point, Darin heard Louis Armstrong's rendition of "Mack the Knife" and decided to put it in his act without much fanfare. He was passionate about "Mack"--the song had its hooks in him and he couldn't cut it loose.

"Mack the Knife" was a Kurt Weill composition from Berthold Brecht's "Threepenny Opera." Darin was never a one-trick pony (being versed in jazz and swing music) and always respected earlier song interpreters such as Al Jolson, Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra, so the song was always in his mind. When it was time for Darin to cut his next album, he explained to Ahmet Ertegun, founder of Atlantic Records, that he was going to do an album of standards. Ertegun thought he was crazy, telling the young man, "You are a successful *rock and roll* artist." Ahmet was not alone, other well-established people in the business vented the same feelings. However, true to Darin form, the singer focused on making an impact to a different style of music, and giving it his signature uppercut.

Years before he was known, Harriet "Hesh" Wasser was a successful publicist who saw Darin hanging at the drugstore with the other young artists trying to be discovered. And not only did

Hesh believed in him back then, but when he was ready to change styles, she became an intricate piece to the “Mack the Knife” puzzle.

In full promoting mode, Hesh contacted conductor/arranger Richard Wess and sold Darin until Wess was a believer and agreed to work on some arrangements for the album. While collaborating, Bobby pitched, “Mack the Knife.” He sang the tune a cappella to Wess, expressing how he wanted the piece to sound. Wess came up with an arrangement so extraordinary that Darin was elated. Together the trio of Hesh, Wess and Darin caught lightning in a jar!

On December 19, 1958, Bobby Darin went in the studio to record some of the songs for his “Bobby Darin: That's All” album, one of them being “Mack the Knife.” Ahmet Ertegun tells of the moment when the track was recorded in an excerpt taken from Dodd Darin's book “Dream Lovers”:

As we were cutting “Mack the Knife” on the first date, there was no doubt in anybody's mind it would be a success. Everyone knew that this was going to be a number one record. Then I realized that having done the rock thing, Bobby was now going to have a big pop hit. We knew as we were cutting it, he's going to become a major, major star. We were jumping up and down, and after the first take, I said, “You've got it! That's it.”

The song that started out as a dirge in the “Threepenny Opera” later evolved to become popular recordings by Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong. However, it was Bobby Darin's swing version that knocked it out of the park.

“Mack” truly does belong to Bobby Darin!

In March of 1959, “Bobby Darin: That's All” (Atco 33-104) was released and “Mack” appeared as band one, side one, becoming a single in August of that year (Atco 45-6147).

The song stayed nine weeks at #1, and, believe it or not, was Darin's only number one hit. “Mack the Knife” was awarded the Grammy for “Record of the Year” in 1959 and Darin became the first recipient of “Best New Artist” Grammy. The song was the 14th most popular single in Billboard's HOT 100 History.

In review, Darin tattoos his thumbprint on the entertainment world in his unreleased, self-made documentary titled “Live at The Coconut Grove” by saying, “Walden Robert Cassotto didn't expect to live to 30 because he was supposed to die when he was 14 of a rather serious illness. Just by being alive, Bobby Darin has done an awful lot.”

In the short 17 years of Bobby Darin's career, his achievements are quite staggering. He was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, the Songwriters Hall of Fame, been the recipient of a Grammy for Lifetime Achievement, was the first person to win the Best New Artist Grammy, was an Oscar nominee, a Golden Globe winner, issued 31 albums (four of them certified gold), had ten top ten hits, and worked as a successful record producer.

Darin's multi-talents came and conquered the world with vision and honesty. Those key attributes never fade, they will endure the test of time.

Jimmy Scalia is a producer, musicologist and writer who currently serves as the official Bobby Darin archivist. As the owner of Sharkbite Productions, Scalia provides lecture services on various musical topics, including the life of Bobby Darin. His career encompasses multiple media facets such as film, television and radio.

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

** Bobby Darin-“Hesh” photo courtesy of Jimmy Scalia Archives.