

Jimmy Van Heusen (1913-1990)

A Favorite Composer of Jazz Musicians, Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby

Many Americans have heard of composers of classic American popular music such as George Gershwin, Cole Porter, and Hoagy Carmichael. But if you ask them about Jimmy Van Heusen, most can only recall a shirt company. Yet, Van Heusen was every bit the equal (or more) of Gershwin, Porter, and Carmichael.

A Favorite Composer of Jazz Musicians

Although Van Heusen doesn't have name recognition amongst the general public like Gershwin, Porter, and Carmichael, he certainly has it among jazz musicians who continue to record the many great tunes he composed from the late-1930s through the late 1970s. These tunes include jazz classics (aka standards) such as:

- But Beautiful (1947)
- Darn That Dream (1939)
- Here's That Rainy Day (1953)
- I Thought About You (1939)
- It Could Happen to You (1944)
- Like Someone in Love (1944)
- Polka Dots and Moonbeams (1940)
- The Second Time Around (1960)

Remarkably, Van Heusen did not write specifically for jazz musicians. He wrote popular music mainly for film, but also for stage. Yet, his rich use of melody, harmony, and the bass line in popular music made his tunes ideal vehicles for jazz musicians.

A Prolific Composer of Quality Songs

Van Heusen composed over 1,000 songs of which **50 songs became classics of American popular music (aka standards)**. The **number of classics** (aka standards) Van Heusen composed is **remarkable**. There have been many composers of American popular music who have written hundreds of tunes, but only one (or two) of these songs have become classics, for example:

- Allie Wrubel, "Gone with the Wind" (1937)
- Karl Suessdorf, "Moonlight in Vermont" (1944)
- David Raksin, "Laura" (1945)
- Walter Gross, "Tenderly" (1946)
- Marvin Fisher, "When Sunny Gets Blue" (1956)
- Bart Howard, "Fly Me to the Moon" (1954)

A Successful Composer for Film and Stage

Van Heusen songs are featured in **over five hundred and eighty films** from the 1940s on into the 1960s. In 1939, Van Heusen teamed with

lyricist Eddie DeLange on songs such as "Heaven Can Wait", "So Help Me", and "Darn That Dream." His work then became more prolific, writing over 60 songs in 1940 alone. **It was in 1940 that he teamed up with the lyricist Johnny Burke.** Burke and Van Heusen **moved to Hollywood** where they **wrote mainly for films** but also for stage musicals throughout the 1940s and early 1950s. In the 1940s, Van Heusen wrote songs for 16 of Bing Crosby's best-known films (including *Road to Morocco* (1942) and *Going My Way* (1944), from which **"Swingin' on a Star" won an Academy Award**) and also wrote songs for *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1949) which starred Crosby.

Van Heusen in the 1950s and Beyond

After lyricist Johnny Burke retired, Van Heusen teamed up with lyricist Sammy Cahn. Their **three Academy Awards for Best Song** were won for

- "All the Way" (1957) from *The Joker Is Wild*
- "High Hopes" (1959) from *A Hole in the Head*
- "Call Me Irresponsible" (1963) from *Papa's Delicate Condition*

Their songs were also featured in *Ocean's Eleven* (1960), which included Dean Martin's version of "Ain't That a Kick in the Head", and in *Robin and the 7 Hoods* (1964) in which Frank Sinatra sang the Oscar-nominated "My Kind of Town". Van Heusen and Cahn also wrote "Love

and Marriage" (1955), "To Love and Be Loved", "Come Fly with Me", "Only the Lonely", and "Come Dance with Me," with many of their compositions being the title songs for Frank Sinatra's albums of the late 1950s.

A Favorite Composer of Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby

Jimmy Van Heusen was a favorite composer of **Frank Sinatra** and **Bing Crosby** who recorded more than 70 of his songs. **Bing and Jimmy were neighbors** near Palm Springs, CA (Thunderbird Heights, a private community in Rancho Mirage, CA). Van Heusen had discovered the desert on his way to Los Angeles from New York for his first Hollywood gig and decided he wanted to live there because of the dry breezes which were great for the asthma he had had since he was a child. He began telling Sinatra and everybody how great it was in the desert. Some say that the Rat Pack, including the Chairman of the Board Sinatra himself, actually found their way to the desert by following Van Heusen there.

Frank Sinatra recorded more songs by Van Heusen than any other songwriter, more than 60 tunes in all. Jimmy and Frank met around 1935 in New York when they were both unknowns. Over the next nearly half a century, they were the best of friends, working and womanizing together. It was Van Heusen who took Sinatra to the hospital after his failed suicide attempt while despondent over the loss of Ava Gardner.

A Ladies' Man

Jimmy Van Heusen was not handsome by conventional Hollywood standards. Moreover, he started losing his hair in his 20s and began to shave his head (a practice ahead of its time). Regardless, Van Heusen was known around Hollywood and the desert to be quite a ladies' man. Actress Angie Dickinson commented, "You would not pick him over Clark Gable any day, but his magnetism was irresistible." Van Heusen partied and played the field for four decades, marrying for the first time in 1969, at age 56. (This marriage lasted until Van Heusen's death in 1990 at the age of 77.)

Another Dimension of Jimmy Van Heusen

Van Heusen was an accomplished aircraft pilot. Using his birth name (Edward Chester Babcock), he worked as a part-time test pilot for Lockheed Corporation in World War II.

Biographical Excerpts from Early Life

Jimmy Van Heusen (birth name: Edward Chester Babcock) was born in Syracuse, New York in **1913**. He began writing music while in high school. At age 16, he renamed himself after the shirt makers Phillips-Van Heusen and used this name as his on-air name during local shows. His close friends called him "Chet". Jimmy was raised Methodist.

Van Heusen studied at Cazenovia Seminary and Syracuse University where he became friends with Jerry Arlen, the younger brother of the great composer Harold Arlen. With Harold's help, Van Heusen wrote songs for the Cotton Club revue, including "Harlem Hospitality". He then became a staff pianist for some of the Tin Pan Alley publishers.

Biographical Excerpts from Later Life

Van Heusen retired in the late 1970s and died in 1990 in Rancho Mirage, California from complications following a stroke at the age of 77. His wife Bobbe survived him. Van Heusen is buried near the Sinatra family in Desert Memorial Park in Cathedral City, California. His grave marker reads "Swinging on a Star."

Academy Awards

Van Heusen was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Song 14 times in 12 different years (in both 1945 and 1964 he was nominated for two songs), and won four times: in 1944, 1957, 1959, and 1963.

Wins

- 1944 – "[Swinging on a Star](#)" (lyrics by [Johnny Burke](#)) for [Going My Way](#)
- 1957 – "[All the Way](#)" (lyrics by [Sammy Cahn](#)) for [The Joker Is Wild](#)
- 1959 – "[High Hopes](#)" (lyrics by Sammy Cahn) for [A Hole in the Head](#)
- 1963 – "[Call Me Irresponsible](#)" (lyrics by Sammy Cahn) for [Papa's Delicate Condition](#)

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