Introduction

FASTER THAN THE SPEED OF LIFE

Thirty-one years after his death, Bobby Darin is in the spotlight again. Just as he had hoped, he haunts us.

Kevin Spacey's 2004 biopic *Beyond the Sea* is bringing Bobby alive to a new generation of fans. Robert Downey Jr. patterned his singing and dancing sequences in the 2003 movie *The Singing Detective* after Bobby. And Bobby's music is everywhere, timeless and uncannily fresh, used in the soundtracks of such popular movies as *American Beauty* ("As Long as I'm Singing") and *Finding Nemo* ("Beyond the Sea") as well as at the start of Sunday baseball games at Yankee Stadium ("Sunday in New York"). He is played more now than when he was alive—and he was a superstar then.

The reassessments of Bobby Darin began in the mid-1990s, when actor Johnny Depp told *Premiere* magazine, "Bobby Darin on the surface was this great personality who smiled and was cocky. He was a popular singer and actor who had such an incredible voice, like crushed

velvet. Beneath that whole cool exterior was a bubbling brew of rage and imbalance. He was in a weird place inside, but all the while, on the outside, he played the role, because back then you had to play the role."

Jazz critic Will Friedwald wrote that "we need only the continually popular and incessantly exciting 'Mack' [the Knife] to remind us that Darin was easily, after Sinatra, the greatest of all swingin' lovers." James Wolcott wrote in *Vanity Fair*, "Among the Brylcream brigade that included Fabian, Frankie Avalon, and Paul Anka, one talent shone brighter, better, and truer. The jubilant rightness of his voice bursts through the past, providing a clear, direct link between him and the listener, undiminished by time or fashion." In a retrospective assessment, Robert Hilburn, pop music critic of the *Los Angeles Times*, recently wrote that Darin was "perhaps the most versatile, ambitious and misunderstood artist of his time." Neil Young told *Rolling Stone* some years back, "I used to be pissed off at Bobby Darin because he changed styles so much. Now I look at him and I think he was a fucking genius."

Back in the age of cool, there was Sinatra, there was Darin, and then there were all the others. But Darin was not Sinatra, whose roots were primarily in jazz and swing and whose musical achievement is the most open and achingly vulnerable autobiography in the history of American popular music. Bobby's roots were rhythm-and-blues, rock, country, and folk, as well as jazz and swing. His inspirations were vaudeville, black churches, music halls, Sam Cooke, Leadbelly, Chubby Checker, Fats Domino, Harry Belafonte, Ray Charles, Little Richard—and Sinatra. His was a raw, restless, cerebral talent, derived from a life steeped in music and performance history. Coming from the streets, he came to the blues naturally, not as exotica. It had the immediacy and urgency of real life. He had so little time, it spoke to him. He didn't have time for teenage bullshit or polite subterfuge; he would make it big, or he would die trying.

Dirt poor as a child, Bobby lived first in Harlem at 125th Street and Second Avenue, then in the South Bronx, and later at 50 Baruch Place in a housing project near FDR Drive on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Baruch Place was close to Yiddish vaudeville houses such as the

Yiddish National, now the Sunshine Cinema, and close to Sammy's Bowery Follies (where zaftig red hot mamas holding little handkerchiefs belted out gay '90s songs atop the bar), Katz's Deli ("Send a Salami to Your Boy in the Army"), the old *Jewish Daily Forward* building on East Broadway, and Wild Bill Davison, Max Kaminsky, and other Dixieland greats playing all night at Central Plaza on Second Avenue, near the fabled Boys Club of New York. He came from a neighborhood from which, 40 years before him, Jack Benny and Jimmy Durante and Eddie Cantor and George Jessel had scuffled their way to the top from nearby Catherine and Cherry Streets. In his 1969 autobiographical song, "City Life," Bobby wrote that there was no heat in his apartment until the weather was so cold that it snowed. There was no backyard. If you wanted a tan, you went up on the roof, but the cement was hard up there. There wasn't time to "have time."

Bobby's crib was a cardboard box in a drawer. As a boy, he cleaned latrines and shined shoes. In his prime, he could swing and summon up a passion equal to Sinatra's, although because he couldn't stand still, he did not often achieve Sinatra's greatness as an interpretive singer. There wasn't the tranquillity, the contemplative time, or a long life behind or before him for that. Miles Davis said, "It takes a long time to sound like yourself." Sinatra had Ava Gardner to torment him; Bobby had a red-haired snake dancer. But unlike Sinatra, he could also move with magical agility, he could do great impressions, he could rock, he was a swift and brilliant comedian, he could play seven instruments, he could write fine songs—167 of them. He wanted to be a songwriter, actor, singer, and musician, and he became all of these. He appeared in 13 films and was nominated for an Academy Award in 1961 for *Captain Newman, M.D.*

At 16, Bobby performed folk songs like "Rock Island Line" at a Catskills resort. He always leaped ahead of his time, paradoxically by encompassing and loving everything that had come before, moving restlessly from folk to rock to the great American songbook to country and blues and back to folk and protest music. Like Ray Charles, he realized that no matter how far apart things are musically, they are very

close at the same time. All music had a oneness to it; genres didn't matter. It was all one thing, and he dug it all.

He did it all, too, and spectacularly well. He was the quintessential glitzy nightclub performer in Las Vegas, one of the biggest draws in the history of that town as well as the hottest attraction at the Copacabana in New York, the most important nightclub in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. At his peak, he outdrew Sinatra and Sammy Davis Jr. He was the last great trouper, the personification of the golden age of show business. At 25 he married America's Sweetheart, movie star Sandra Dee, and was dueting with Judy Garland, George Burns, and Jack Benny. He gave it all up and moved on. He was caught in America's most radical period of musical transition. Born at the end of one era, he bridged the gap between the 1950s and the 1960s.

Bobby spent his life searching for his natural self. But as he told a friend, "The key to me is that I don't belong anyplace. I don't belong in the streets of the Bronx, in high society, or suburbia. I don't belong among beatniks, and I sure don't think I belong in hotel suites."

"I don't know if he was ballsy enough to touch on everything, or scared, hoping that if he kept moving quick, they couldn't find him," says Darin archivist and record producer Jimmy Scalia about Bobby's incredible range of styles and genres.

"He was a kid from the big-band era who could sing like a black artist," Dick Clark says, "and also sing with a 20- or 30-piece band. I mean, those are divergent worlds that *hated* one another. And then he could make a funky little rock-and-roll record."

Everyone says he was brash, but most also speak at the same time of his warmth. Songwriter Doc Pomus wrote in his unpublished journals, "Bobby was a great singer, songwriter, cool blues piano player, and vibraphonist. He was also a smart aleck with a chip on his shoulder that sometimes resembled a log cabin. But my relationship with him was always warm and like family."

You can start at 50 Baruch Place, because it's still there, several blocks of housing projects, today largely Hispanic and black. The

ethnic cast has changed, but you can still see what it was and continues to be: the last vestige of dignity for the very poor who are tightly hanging on. The poor who haven't given up, who still work from nine to five, who still have family units, who push baby carriages; women in pink, in high heels, who look forward to christenings and 50-year wedding celebrations—who try to keep it together. They are the forgotten ones who hold on to the last rung of the ladder.

Bobby came from these honorable poor.

He shot up to the highest heights of show business.

To understand who he was and where he got to, you need to understand where he came from. Then the magnitude of the leap becomes amazingly clear.

Bobby came from Italians and neighboring Jews, from poverty, from terrible physical illness and enforced isolation. What did he do when he was bedridden? He read: fiction, history, poetry. A death sentence hung over him from childhood. He was a loner from the start, always outside his peer group. He devoured life but rarely enjoyed it. In 37 years he conquered the world but could not quell the static within him.

He was Mister Cool to the world, but the world also watched that side of him give way and change before their eyes as life's realities—Vietnam, the civil-rights struggle—shot bullets into that image. Bobby turned from the narcissistic show-business mirror to look out into the burning streets of 1960s America, and he could not avert his gaze. He realized that the Copacabana and Las Vegas and *The Johnny Carson Show* could not encompass all that he knew. He could not stop listening, seeing, changing.

Harriet Wasser, Bobby's publicist, whose commitment to him is, like his manager Steve Blauner's, lifelong, says: "The reality is that there hasn't been anyone like Bobby since. You hear people talk about other singers as 'A combination of Sinatra and Darin.' But once they get to Darin, there's nobody else."

May 14, 1936–December 20, 1973