



Doris Day: The Postwar Face of Limitless Possibility and 'American Exceptionalism'

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Doris Day died last week and news of it left me deeply saddened. I very soon found out I wasn't alone in feeling that. But what's struck me since her passing isn't simply the widespread sorrow, even, profound grief the news gave rise to, or even the boundless affection people had for her, it was the massive outpouring of gratitude. Knowing Doris Day was in the world made countless people feel less lonely by one

For the world not only lost one of its most accomplished female vocalists and movie actors, it also lost one of its most enduring symbols of 'American Exceptionalism.' One of the key takeaways from the many tributes paid to her, that Doris Day represented, for millions, the very essence of kindness, and honourability, and, yes, integrity.

Hers was the welcoming face of America. I'd even venture to say that for some she all but came to personify the Statue of Liberty. A face you could instantly believe in. A face you could always and forever afterwards put your trust in; the face of someone who was good and honest and true.

She was the very embodiment of U.S. soft power. A sunny, shining, wonderfully charming signifier of the limitless drive and infinite possibility of the country that had helped save Great Britain and much of Western Europe, not once, but twice in the first half of the Twentieth Century.

To which we should add the Marshall Plan that helped much of the 'old world' rebuild and the GI Bill that helped rebuild hearts and minds at home by providing funds for college education, unemployment insurance, and housing for U.S. veterans of the Second World War. Truly, extraordinarily generous and far-sighted acts, by any measure; realpolitik, be damned.

The United States of America: the 'Beacon of Democracy'; the 'Shining City on the Hill' for the world to admire and, yes, envy from afar. And, by golly, how we all did that in the years following the War. Well, most did. Those not belittled, embittered, or angered by America's vast display of wealth and accomplishment, but inspired by it; moved to work all the harder to learn from it, and maybe, even, one day, with good fortune or luck, become part of it.

The very thing, indeed, that Doris Day came to symbolize with that truly exceptional "certain something" of hers that was ever present in every character she ever portrayed on film or, indeed, was there in her exquisite phrasing and lyrical interpretation in every song she ever sang. You could do nothing but believe in her every emotion, believe in her every word. It was as if she was singing to you, alone. And whatever 'it' is, Doris had 'it' from the very beginning and she never lost it.

She'd originally trained to be a dancer, but a car-crash put paid to that dream. It was when she was recovering in hospital that her mother heard her singing along with the big bands on the radio and scraped together funds for her to have voice lessons. Soon, Doris was singing on a local radio station, in Ohio, then, quickly, graduated to fronting various big bands in Chicago and New York. She was only 16. And the rest, as they say, is pop music history.

Her first No.1 hit, 'Sentimental Journey', recorded late 1944, struck a chord with GIs returning from the European front and she came to symbolize every soldier's sweetheart back home; the proverbial, 'girl next door'. After which, affection for her in the U.S. only grew and grew. In 1948, she had another huge hit with 'It's Magic' by composer Jule Styn and lyricist Sammy Cahn. The only difference, this time, it was featured in her very first film 'Romance On The High Seas', which helped launch her on her stellar movie career.

With no previous acting experience, she went on to make 39 feature films, over the next twenty years. As well as starring in musicals, she played key dramatic roles in such films as 'Love Me Or Leave Me', 'Midnight Lace', and 'Pillow Talk' for which she received an Oscar nomination. She was one of the top 'box office' draws of the 20th Century and was listed among the 'Top Ten Stars' no less than ten times between 1951 and 1966, ranking at No.1 for almost four consecutive years between 1960 and 1964.

She was always the perfect counterpart to whichever leading man she was paired with on screen, notable among whom were: Kirk Douglas, Jimmy Cagney, Howard Keel, Frank Sinatra, James Stewart, Clark Gable, Richard Widmark, Jack Lemmon, Rock Hudson,

David Niven, Rex Harrison, Cary Grant, and James Garner; an extraordinary array of Hollywood talent. Yet what's utterly undeniable is that her enchanting screen presence gave each one of them an added dimension of believability, even greater credibility.

And when Hollywood and much of the world later shunned Rock Hudson when he was diagnosed with AIDS, she never once turned away from him, and always supported him, her friendship staunch and true. Hemingway, himself, could never have conceived of a more-stalwart heroine.

Which is to say she was always so much more than the 'the girl next door' label people seemed to always want to pin on her. She was the post-war American everywoman; newly imbued with sprit, courage, and determination. More often than not playing a modern, independent, 'working woman' that other women could identify with. Wanted to be. Wanted to emulate. And not just in hair or makeup, or dress, but in attitude and demeanour and good old American moxie.

And I freely admit, here and now; my heart, at last, an open door, my secret love no secret, anymore; Doris Day was the reason I first fell in love with America or rather 'the idea' of America. I fell in love with her, when I was but a child of tender years; in what was still a very bleak, grey, austerity-ridden, post-war Britain; the very first moment I saw her in vibrant 'Technicolor', in fringed buckskins, red bandana, and blue U.S. cavalry peaked cap, balancing with a dancer's grace, atop the precariously swaying Deadwood stagecoach, singing, joyously, irresistibly, in the rip-roaring opening scene of the film musical of the old Wild West, 'Calamity Jane'.

My love for her deepened all the more with 'Que será, será.' The song played over and over on the radiogram at home, my lovely mum always singing along, happy and carefree. And I did, too, kidnapped, even, as a little boy, not by the villains of the piece, as happens to Doris' on-screen son in Alfred Hitchcock's 'The Man Who Knew Too Much', but by the preternatural magic of Doris Day's voice and charm, her grace and her character and personality. Such love runs very deep.

Doris Day touched more people than she could ever have realised: men, women, and children in the U.S., the U.K., and the world over. She was as pure a delight as could ever be imagined and a beacon of the very best of America. A generosity of spirit she continued to display throughout her post-film and TV years, with her unceasing advocacy and impassioned support for Animal Welfare.

"Que será, será." Whatever will be, will be." But, dear, delightful Doris Day, for millions, and for me, life will never be quite the same without you.

Thank you for all the wonderful music, movies, and memories.

But, most of all, thank you for all the good things you came to embody for all good-hearted people, the world over.