



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on January 7, 2013

The Passing Era of Patti Page

The recent passing of singing great [Patti Page](#) (pictured) puts a lot of things in better perspective. For one thing, it ought to give us pause whenever we hear the familiar throwaway line, “What’s in a name?” In fact, in the play where that line originated, names meant a great deal. Only the star-crossed lovers, Romeo and Juliet, thought them mere trifles. Their own passions, at odds with the family feuds, cost them their lives. In our time, with less concern for pedigrees and family lines, names mean not so much. Few think much about the origins of names anymore. In my Catholic youth, a baptized person had to have the name of a canonized saint. Whether that requirement still holds, I’m not sure. It is common of course for a child to receive a first or middle name after an aunt, uncle or grandparent. But starting in the 1950s, it became almost common for a baby to be named after a TV character, even a soap opera character. Chances are if you meet a young woman named Samantha or Tabitha, it’s because her mother was a fan of the TV series *Bewitched* still running in syndication.



What, you ask, does that have to do with Patti Page? Well, chances are if you had heard that Clara Ann Fowler died, you would have thought little of it. And I dare say that even with her enormous talent and stunning beauty, Clara Ann Fowler would not have sold nearly as many records if she had not changed her name to Patti Page. Nor would Engelbert Humperdink be quite so memorable if he had not changed his name from whatever it was before. Likewise Bob Dylan. And who would have believed a two-fisted, straight-shooting cowboy with the commanding on-screen presence could be Marion Morrison? But as John Wayne, he was both believable and legendary.

But Miss Page also put something else in perspective. Her career blossomed in the 1950s, when the word “lady” meant something more than it seems to today. Remarkably, her recordings flourished during the years when girls, who would not be mistaken for “ladies” in that older sense of the term, were literally throwing themselves and their lingerie and screaming at the likes of Elvis and later the Beatles, Tom Jones, the aforementioned Engelbert, etc.

And there stood Miss Page, the “singing rage,” not aloof, but dignified — not demanding, but earning respect by that very dignified, “girl-next-door” presence.

That “girl next door” business, by the way, is a title that was even more often attributed to Doris Day.



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It's more than a little misleading. If the typical girl next door looks like either Doris Day or Patti Page, most of us have been living in the wrong neighborhoods. But "wholesome," which often goes with the "girl-next-door" label, fit either lady, at least in terms of public image. We don't need to know about their private lives, despite what the notorious Oscar Levant is alleged to have said about Miss Day. ("I knew her *before* she was a virgin.") The problem with too many of today's entertainers, heterosexual and homosexual alike, is that they refuse to leave their decadent sex lives in the closet and choose instead to flaunt their dissolute and libertine lifestyles before us.

The difference is not limited to female performers, however much some people might like to talk about Britney's exposed navel or Madonna's raunchy lyrics. Indeed, the passing of Patti Page brings to mind one of many memorable one-line observations offered by my favorite columnist, the late, great Joseph Sobran. "You can't tell me this wasn't a better country," Sobran wrote, "when Nat King Cole was on the radio and Bishop Sheen was on television."

In some ways, of course, it was worse. The way we treated people of color, for example. Constitutional issues aside, it shouldn't have taken the 101st Airborne to allow black students to attend Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957. People of any and all colors should have been able to register voters of all colors in any part of the country without fearing for their lives. But the basic institutions of our country — marriage, family, community schools, civic organizations — were sound. The very image that sophisticates like to ridicule about the 1950s, the "Ozzie and Harriet" household, was respected, if often in the breach. Yes, there were practices that belied the ideals, leading to charges of hypocrisy. But at least we had ideals. We subscribed to certain ethical standards and we often fell below them. Now we seem to have no ethical standards and we fall below even that.

We have always had murderers, for example, but people for the most part at least killed people their own size. The December 14 massacre of first-graders at Sandy Hook School in Newtown, Connecticut, brings that painfully to mind. But our military experience has had a corrupting effect. Is it too impolitic to observe that our president, Barack "the bomber," has almost certainly killed more children with his drone strikes in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and elsewhere than the depraved gunman killed at the Sandy Hook School? There are other ways in which we have normalized violence. It is surely impolitic to observe that abortion in the United State kills every day 200 times more little human beings than the killer slew in Newtown. Impolitic, but true.

Consider the music of Patti Page — and be merciful, please, and forget songs like "Doggie in the Window" — and compare it with today's music — if, in fact, the noise mass-produced on records today is really music. There was an innocent charm or, perhaps more accurately, the charm of innocence about her songs. Yes, the prize may have ultimately been found in the bedroom, but it took a lot of romance to get there. The music of Patti Page was mainly about courtship and romance and the stage was often the dance floor.

Ironically for such a beautiful and talented lady, Miss Page in song seemed to specialize in losing men on the dance floor. Her biggest hit, her signature song, was "[Tennessee Waltz](#)" in which the singer's sad story is that she paused at a dance to introduce a loved one to a friend and "My friend stole my sweetheart from me." A similar song, though not quite so popular, was called, "[Changing Partners](#)." Again through a polite convention — that of changing partners in the middle of a dance — the singer lost her beloved:

We were waltzing together to a dreamy melody



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*When they called out, "Change partners,"
And you waltzed away from me
Now my arms feel so empty
As I gaze around the floor
And I'll keep on changing partners
Till I hold you once more.*

On dance floors today, it's hard to tell who is dancing with whom, so perhaps losing a partner is not such a big deal. And of course, in these days of marriage, divorce, marriage again, serial monogamy ad infinitum, the whole idea of changing partners has moved, along with much else, from the dance floor to the bedroom. Romance has been supplanted by eroticism. Frankie Lyman and the Teenagers had a big hit in the heyday of rock 'n' roll called, "Why Do Fools Fall in Love?" Today we have no shortage of fools, but the idea of romance, courtship of falling in love before consummating that love on a wedding bed, or a garden patch or, perhaps today, on an army cot, seems to have fallen by the wayside. Today the question might be why do fools — and other mortals — increasingly *not* fall in love? Why do they skip that step? It calls to mind the story of Newt Gingrich asking Bob Dole, "Why do people take an instant dislike to me?" And Dole's droll reply: "Saves time."

On a recording, we have words vocalized and music played on instruments. When the singer performs on stage, we have added the visual image. With a Patti Page, a Perry Como, a Vicki Carr, or a Pat Boone, the image was wholesome and offered a touch of class in the non-snooty sense of that long abandoned word and concept. Starting sometime in the Sixties it became different. Hosting a variety show called *Hollywood Palace* in the mid-Sixties, Dean Martin led into a commercial break following a number by the Rolling Stones, who looked a little strange and, well, scary. Martin urged the viewers to stay tuned. "Don't go away," Martin said, then added nervously, "You wouldn't leave me alone with the Rolling Stones now, would ya?"

Try to imagine Patti Page dressed — or half dressed — like some of today's singers and mimicking their words and gestures on any stage. You could as easily imagine the pope doing that. Picture Patti Page and then picture Madonna or Britney Spears. I happened to see Ms. Spears performing once on ABC's *Good Morning America*. As she pranced about, considerably less than half-dressed, while wailing her lyrics before millions of viewers, her small son, aged four or five, watched from the front row. Is that how any man would like to see his mother perform?

Try to imagine Britney Spears crooning lyrics like this:

*Though we danced for one moment
And too soon we had to part,
In that wonderful moment,
Something happened to my heart.
So I'll keep changing partners
Till you're in my arms and then,
Oh, my darling, I will never
Change partners again.*



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Somehow that kind of loving devotion does not fit today's notions of experimenting with partners and remaining "sexually active" until you run out of steam.

Patti Page belonged to an era that now seems to have been only a moment. Too soon did she depart. And for those of us who loved her and her music, something's happened to our hearts. Let us pray she is in heaven, where there is no more changing partners — no, never again.

Photo of Patti Page in 1958: AP Images



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