Out of the Shadows: Dean Martin (1997)

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I HAVE RECENTLY "rediscovered" Dean Martin, and, as I usually do in such cases—or even when I've only made a mere "discovery"—I've bought up nearly the entire stock of any recordings of his to be found in my local shops, not only for myself, but also as presents for everyone around me, for the people I like, that is. I enjoy sharing my enthusiasms and my finds, as I did a few months ago when I "discovered" a recording by an actor who, unlike Dean Martin, was never famous as a singer, and who, initially, one would never expect to hear singing calypsos, namely, Robert Mitchum. That CD is quite simply unmissable: not only does Mitchum do a perfect imitation of the black voices that used to sing those Jamaican tunes, but, in the accompanying booklet, there are two priceless photos of that apparently serious and manifestly virile actor, holding a pair of maracas or else a glass of rum and with a Caribbean lady by his side, possibly nibbling his earlobe.

Many younger readers will have no idea who Dean Martin was and will never even have heard a calypso, and if they know who Mitchum is, that will only be because he's still alive and because, despite his great age, he still occasionally appears in movies. I suppose that, while they might be amused by the latter's nonsense songs—for example, "Jean and Dinah" or "I Learn a Merengue, Mama"—they would probably find Martin's suave melodies or semi-country ballads unbearably antiquated, with their overblown American orchestrations. Not to mention his often "Italianized" versions—half in English and half in Italian—of "Arrivederci Roma" or "Ritorname/Return to Me."

Dean Martin, born Dino Paulo Crocetti in 1917, died only two years ago now, but he had already been consigned, if not to oblivion, certainly to the shadows. It had been quite some time since he had appeared in any new movies, and perhaps even longer since his songs and his extraordinary voice had joined the vast legion of vague memories that slumber in people's inconstant and forgetful ears. When he died, I read a few obituaries, all of which spoke rather dismissively of him as both actor and singer. As a singer, he was always overshadowed by his friend and "boss," Frank Sinatra, to whose clan he belonged and to whom he was a faithful lieutenant in numerous movies. He didn't have the pretensions of the man still known as "The Voice," nor did he share in his ambitions or political maneuverings. While Martin was certainly no prodigy as an actor, he left behind him four memorable performances—in Howard Hawks' *Rio Bravo*, Vincente Minnelli's *Some Came Running* and *Bells Are Ringing*, and Billy Wilder's *Kiss Me, Stupid*—which, nowadays, when actors can get away with doing so little, would be enough to transform any newcomer into a legend. And he was, for years, a perfect straight man to my idol Jerry Lewis.

It should be said, too, that he was immensely famous precisely because he was both singer and actor. The oblivion of actors and musicians—and of writers too—seems, in one sense, the saddest of all, precisely because they are the people who, objectively speaking, stand the greatest chance of being remembered. Their work is the most enduring imaginable, far more so than that of politicians or bankers or judges or military men—to mention only those professions that tend to leave the deepest mark—people on whom the fate of their contemporaries all too often depends. However, a movie can continue to be shown, and the actor lives on with it; a record can be listened to ad infinitum, like the 1931 recording by La Argentinita, on which you can hear García Lorca accompanying her on the piano just five years before he was murdered, and it's odd that the sounds made by his fingers more than half a century ago should be there within our grasp; and as for writers, you can go on following them for centuries after they've died, just by reading what they wrote or said. Failing to endure in an activity that does allow for a kind of durability seems like a double failure, a double oblivion. Sometimes, people do get "rediscovered," and then someone inhabiting the purgatory of the forgotten suddenly becomes fashionable again. Sometimes, it's thanks to someone who is alive now—because, despite the relative unimportance of the living, we do tend to pay attention to them and even listen to their recommendations. And since I still am among the living, I'm happy to affirm today that, however antiquated he may seem, the despised Dean Martin was the real "Voice" and the best crooner of the second half of the twentieth century. At least I've managed to get a few of my friends to listen to him.□

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)

Jealousy of Masters

I've got to learn to paint like Basquiat,
And how to speak like Churchill in the Blitz,
And how to shriek like Kurt Cobain—he ought
To resurrect and teach me all his tricks.
If I don't ever learn to play guitar
Like Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, Hendrix,
The Edge, I'll kill myself—I've gone too far
In jealousy of masters to be fixed.
Paint like Picasso, sing like Callas, fly
Like Lindbergh, and please could I build like Frank
Lloyd Wright, and steal a scene like Hepburn—why
Not do it all with nobody to thank,
And be an island in the barren sea,
And love my lucky self like you loved me?

—*Wes Civilz*