

A Big Breeze in the Trade

I'D met Frankie Laine before I left New Zealand. He's a hard man to miss when some houses have a radio in every room and juke boxes are spreading south faster than nassella tussock, and I must say if there was any pleasure in that recorded meeting it was mostly Mr. Laine's. To anyone raised on the tender warblings of Rudy Vallee, Crosby and Russ Columbo, the biting whip cracks and echoing, indecipherable profanity of *Mule Train* were as disturbing as the wails of the torn soul in *The Cry of the Wild Goose*. Something with earth at its roots seemed to be shoving its way into a region where the plants flourish on plush.

It was these two records, *Mule Train* and *Wild Goose*, that made him suddenly popular in New Zealand. His name started to appear in request sessions and the *Hit Parade*. Soon the question, Who is Frankie Laine? dated you terribly, because everyone was asking. Have you heard Frankie Laine singing his latest, *Swamp Girl* or *On the Sunny Side of the Street*, or *Man Gets Lonesome*? There was so much blaze in this popularity that I wondered at intervals what caused it, and when Mr. Laine turned up at a new Vancouver supper club a fortnight after I reached Canada, I thought I'd better go and find out.

Mr. Seymour Heller, the Laine manager, said it could be fixed. He'd call me right back. When I phoned again three days later he was apologetic. "I meant to call you," he said, "but they've been rough on us here. Real rough. I'll give you a buzz."

This time he did, and the same night I cut my way into the Palomar a little after ten, past some uncharitable looking bouncers and through a mass of people sitting or standing everywhere except on the ceiling. Mr. Heller was pessimistic about getting Frank into the place at all, much less having me meet him. "Frank's singing at 10.30," he said. "You take in the show and then go over the road to Oscar's. I'll get him there as soon as I can."

We sat down in the foyer with Carl Fischer, Frank's accompanist and

arranger, a slight, pleasant, latin-dark man with an easy flow of words.

"He started as a marathon dancer in 1931," Fischer said. "He used to sing between dances when he had the breath. You know how it was then. You had to work twenty-four hours a day to make enough to eat. Marathon dancing faded out and Frank took more and more to singing. He worked in all sorts of joints, mostly round New York, and often he didn't work. He slept on park benches, that sort of thing. He had it good for a while. He was working for 5 dollars a week in New Jersey and a friend of his in an Italian restaurant used to give him a feed of spaghetti once a day. That was a whole lot more than he usually ate. He got a job in a defence plant in Cleveland in 1941, and then in Los Angeles. I met him in 1944. We used to work out arrangements all the time and do jobs when we got them. He never worked with a band, always as a single. We always hoped to hit the jackpot with a record and we kept on with those arrangements. Frank was fired from Billy Berg's in Hollywood in 1946, but the Morocco picked him up straight away for more money. That's where he really caught on. His record of *That's My Desire* was released in November, 1946, and was a big hit right through '47. It sold well over a million. There've been all the others since then, and now we've got *Rose Rose I Love You* and *Jezebel* at number three and four on the *Hit Parade*. They're on the same record, and if we can get them to one and two we'll do something that's never been done before. It'd make a big breeze in the trade."

Mr. Heller, who'd been casting about like a hound in thick bracken, chivvied Fischer round the back. It was time for the show.

Frankie Laine-in-person came jogging into the spotlight on the balls of his feet, carrying his arms high and moving his shoulders like a boxer doing road work; the masculine approach, the reaction away from Sinatra. That evening he was wearing a big shouldered, biscuit tuxedo, but the audience would have loved him as well in a bath towel. They oooohed and whistled through his first number, a hurled-together quickie on the attractions of Vancouver. He did four songs and then jogged off a few steps, to be pulled up by the whistles of noon hour, a harem's worth of ecstatic screams.

He's a generous singer. He gives it out all the time, and you can see where some of it comes from: a little of Louis Armstrong's relaxation and good humour, something of the brash emotional approach of Al Jolson and the mammy singers, a dash of the cowboy



FRANKIE LAINE
He worked in all sorts of joints

West and a touch of the genuing power of an evangelist shouter.

More Country Than Town

Besides those things there is Frankie Laine, dark, thick haired, smiling, no bigger than life size after a show, even in Oscar's, a place where they undertake to serve celebrities the biggest steaks in the world. I asked him what he thought he had to offer. He liked the question and clinked the ice in half a glass of ginger ale while he thought about it, heavy faced, the weight of those bad years telling in repose. "Sincerity, I guess," he said. "Every time for each song. I like the audience reaction, but I'd do the same if it wasn't there."

That seemed fair enough, and he probably learnt it by doing just the same when the audience was there, but hostilely. He must have been thinking along those lines, too, because he said: "I guess that kept me going in the tough times. You can't live on audience reaction then. If you don't have it in here, I guess you go down." Coming from an ex-marathon dancer and one meal a day man, that was hardly a brag.

He was interested that *Mule Train* was such a big hit in New Zealand.

"There's more country than town in my singing," he said. "I dunno why that is, seeing I never get away from the big cities, but it seemed to be something the customers wanted."

A man came up to the table with pictures to be autographed. I left.

"Take it easy," he said in farewell.

"And you," I replied, hoping devoutly that my easy would mean more than his; the country singer lost in the cities.

"If you want to go on making a big breeze in the trade," Carl Fischer had said, "you have to rush around."

—G. leF. Y.

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taken on a new mood with a morning retrospective to high summer. We were leaving early, but I took time to walk again in the grassy streets close to the town. There was a little more activity sevenish than there had been the day before. I was overtaken by a small ginger boy on a bike. He was throwing papers at Manaia's fifteen state houses and whistling "The Old Piano-Roll Blues." Mr. Suter's van rattled past full of milk churns. The driver (who knows, Mr. Suter himself perhaps), gave me a cheerful wave. It wasn't far to the fields, open country nicely ruled by hedges of boxthorn. The road ran into the distance, falling gradual miles to the rich blue line of the sea. I turned back, and there, above it all, Egmont was asserting itself, crystalline in the sunlight.

The man at the service station filled the tank. "A great day for the trots," he said. We agreed with him and drove out of town. If we were to believe the Post Office clock as we passed, the time was two minutes to eleven.

N.Z. LISTENER, JULY 27, 1951.